PAPERBACK LIBRARY 50 CENTS SILVER EDITION 52-165

Delilah

The blazing novel of the most seductive woman who ever lived

JEFFERSON COOPER

DELILAH THE PRIESTESS AND KHARNOS THE SLAVE

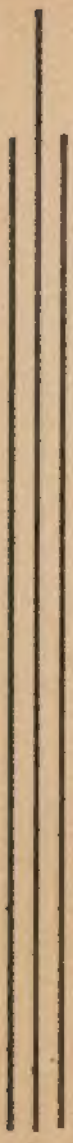
"Incense? Or a better tribute, Trojan?"

I knew what she meant. Her goddess, whose naked, ruby-tipped bosom gleamed above us on the altar, was the deity of carnal caresses.

It was three years since I had touched a woman. The sight of Delilah stretched half-nude on a couch at the banquet, the smooth bodies of the dancing girls, the drunken lust of the women of Ashkelon, had fired my senses.

My hand tore away her thin tunic and left her standing in only her golden slippers and the golden collar round her neck. She was insolent, magnificent.

I had to have her, if I died for it.



Delilah

Jefferson Cooper

PAPERBACK LIBRARY, INC.
New York

Copyright © 1962 by Paperback Library, Inc.

PAPERBACK LIBRARY ORIGINAL

First Printing: September 1962

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

BOOK ONE: The Book of Kharnos . . . 7

BOOK TWO: The Book of Samson . . . 63

BOOK THREE: The Book of Delilah . . 139

BOOK ONE: The Book of Kharnos

ONE

The temple of Ashtaroth in Ashkelon

I stood before the woman, Delilah of Ashkelon.

Beyond the stonework screen that looked out over the harbor waters of this coastal city of the Philistines, yellow lightning slashed a jagged web across a black sky. Thunder exploded with such violence that the tiles of the Temple floor quivered under our feet. Once more the forces of the upper air were waging battle with impassive mother earth in their eternal warfare. To my mind it seemed that the very ferocity of the storm was an omen, a portent to me and to this woman who was high priestess of Ashtaroth.

Of good? Of evil? Only time would tell.

My name is Kharnos. Once I was a prince of Troy before the Greeks under Menelaus and Agamemnon—curse their names!—burned it down. Three years ago I had been blood brother to Hector, until Achilles killed him. More than a hundred men have died under my throwing spears and the long bronze sword which lies broken and useless in the dead, black ruins of Ilion. Once too, my name ranked with the great ones, with Ajax, with Ulysses, with Aeneas.

Now I stood in this place, a slave to the high priestess, Delilah.

Only the rag at my loins could I call my own. As my back was scarred by the marks of the whips, so was my soul scarred by this servitude into which the fates had plunged me. Bitterness twisted my mouth and was as ashes on my tongue. I who had commanded thousands must stand and wait while the eyes of my mistress studied my body, the rolling muscles and wide shoulders and big hands that were more used to the feel of weapons than to the handle of the grinding wheel that had been my lot these past few months in Ashkelon.

At last she nodded, saying, "You should do. Golithal tells

me you were a famous warrior in Troy. I have need of such a man."

My lips were dumb. What need had I for words, who must be as an animal until commanded to break silence? Delilah smiled secretly, as if to herself. Perhaps she sensed this sullen resignation in me and sought to goad it to flaming life.

Her plucked brows lifted. "Well, slave? Were you a warrior?"

Apparently all the spirit had not been beaten out of me on the long sea road from Ilion to Ashkelon. Pride flared my nostrils as my head went back. "My chariot rode hub to hub with that of Hector when we went out to battle. My spears slew almost as many as did his, my sword even more."

Delilah nodded as if content.

She was a beautiful wench, I give her that. More lovely than Helen herself, for whom we men of Troy fought so long and so pitilessly with the Greeks. Dark hair was piled high on her shapely head, a thick ringlet falling to her bared shoulder. Her skin was dusky, akin to that of an Egyptian. Her eyes were black and limpid, her mouth like a ripe red fruit. Aie, she was lovely, this Delilah.

And shameless.

She wore only a thin chiton of transparent byssus, so that it seemed she walked naked through a white mist. My glance touched the thrusting breasts, the firm tapering thighs. This evening, with the tall candles casting shadows across her finely chiselled features as the *trompa* wind swept their flames back and forth along the stone Temple walls, she seemed not so much the priestess as a woman, nervous and unsure of herself.

Her hands went to her temples where she massaged her dusky skin slowly. Lines of strain ran down from her nostrils to her mouth as indecision tore at her nerves. Without removing her rubbing fingertips she began to speak.

"Which of them has a greater need for you, Trojan—the goddess Ashtaroth whom I worship, or the king of Ashkelon whom I serve?" She smiled a little at my expression. "Shall I name you consort to the goddess for a year—or put a weapon in your hand and ask you to kill a man?"

In irritation at herself, she clapped her hands together. Her brilliant eyes, under lids tinted green by malachite, roamed around the chamber as if hunting inspiration. Again the floor tiles quivered underfoot as thunder burst overhead and lightning scratched the sky. The wind shook the red brocade drapes and blew out a few candles close to the stonework screen.

Her eyes clung longest to the far end of the room, where a great ivory statue of a naked woman, her hands clasped under her heavy breasts to lift and offer them to the beholder, stood framed between two rows of pillars. This was Ashtaroth the fertility goddess who had different names in Egypt, Crete and mighty Babylon. She was the mother, the fecund one. A votive bowl held smouldering herbs which rose in a trail of grey incense about her so that it seemed her ivory hips had turned to living flesh, moving lazily and lewdly as though to tempt me.

Delilah shivered. Her eyes came back to me, studying my body carefully. Suddenly she smiled and swayed toward me, walking with a gentle shifting of her hips. Her palm came out to rest on my naked belly, a little above the scant loincloth. I quivered under her touch as might an unbroken colt to the hand of its master. Her red mouth pursed thoughtfully as she regarded me.

"How long has it been since you had a woman?"

"Since Ilion fell three years ago."

"Once you were a man who made his own decisions. I have prayed to Ashtaroth for guidance but the goddess keeps her counsel. Mine is the responsibility for the choice, mine alone."

I waited, having learned during the past three years that it is the lot of a slave to wait, quiet and unspeaking. My lips may have hungered to shout defiance, just as my muscles trembled with the desire for revolt. Yet I stood like a dumb ox, patient and unmoving.

Her hand was warm against me, faintly moist. The blood was beating faster in my veins at her nearness for she was naked under the byssus and perfumed with the aromatics of Punt and Sheba. If I put a hand on her it would cost me my life; and though I was a slave, I was too much the realist to waste it because of a wanton Philistine woman.

As if she understood the temptation she made for me, she laughed under her breath and leaned against me so that now she could feel the hardness of my body. Her eyes and lips were upturned, inches from my own. Her warm breath teased my mouth.

"Why not, Trojan? Why should not yours be the tongue to pronounce the future? Play at prophet for a spell, knowing that you control not only your destiny but mine as well."

"What destiny, priestess?" I asked hoarsely.

"Your own. Will you be consort to Ashtaroth—or a killer?

As for mine—shall I remain high priestess or reign as queen in Ashkelon?"

"All I ask of the future is my freedom," I growled.

Her thin brows rose derisively. "No matter what? Even if your bid for freedom must surely end in your death?"

"Even so."

"Hear me, then! Every year we choose a man in Philistia who spends that year as Baal, consort of Ashtaroth. He is fed the finest foods and is clad in the softest garments. No man living in all Philistia has lived as he shall live. Her priestesses are his wives to enjoy when and where the spirit moves him. Anything he desires is his. He has only to express the wish. You can be this man, Trojan."

Well, now. This might not be so bad for a slave who had known only blows and kicks these past few years. For a while at least, I would revel in a life which might well be envied by Shepthazzah, who was Tyrant in Ashkelon. Food, wine, women, soft clothes to cradle my skin. Day in and day out, night after night, all these might be mine. For an entire year.

And at its end—

"Then I die," I said. "As the ritual demands."

Delilah inclined her head. Excitement was flushing her dusky cheeks, firming her breasts into hard mounds against my chest. Her hands were clenched so tightly on my shoulders that the skin was white over the knuckles. This same excitement caused her to rise on her sandalled toes and teeter back and forth. I realized this woman revelled in the power she held, as high priestess. With her lips she could doom any man, any woman she chose.

"Of course. But you'll die swiftly, without pain. For you'll be Khamos no longer but the godhead Baal, who is born and lives only to die so that he may be resurrected."

I drew a deep breath. "What other choice have I?"

"In Israel there is a man who is an enemy of Philistia. He must be slain. Should you decide to seek him out and kill him —the moment he dies you're free."

My laughter grated in the stone room. "Are you mad? What man would refuse to go and kill the Israelite? Once outside your city walls, he could run whither he would, to Egypt or to Crete or even further."

Delilah smiled. It was not a nice smile. "You ride with four companions, four picked fighting men of the royal bodyguard. All of you shall be disguised as wandering mercenaries. As

such you shall come into Israel. There you will seek out this man and kill him."

"Four men," I said slowly.

"Whose duty it shall be to slay you should you turn aside from your mission. They are men devoted to Shepthazzah, who is king in Ashkelon. They have sworn on their necks to bring you back dead—or the news that you've done what you set out to do."

"If I kill him, I'll go free?"

"You will."

"Then I choose to kill."

Her eyes mocked me. "Even if he himself will kill you? Almost certainly, this will be your end. He is protected by his god, Yahweh."

I grinned. "I don't believe in gods."

"Not even Cybele? I have been told men worshiped Cybele in Ilion. Or now that Ilion is no more, is Cybele also dead?"

I shrugged. I was a warrior, more used to swords than incense bowls. The muscles of my body had grown thick on the field of battle, not soft and flabby before a temple altar.

Delilah went on, with that faint smile which twisted her mouth so oddly. "There is no need to make your choice now. I only tell you alternatives."

"I need no thought. My mind's made up already. A man does what he knows best. From childhood I was trained to slay. With the spear, with a bow, with a sword."

"Can you kill a god?"

I scowled at all this talk of gods. Dagon. Tammuz. Osiris. Even this Israelite god, this Yahweh. All were the same, all demanded sacrifice and gave nothing in return. My eyes turned toward the ivory statue of Ashtoreth holding out her breasts.

"I can kill a god," I said flatly.

Delilah gasped, divining my intention. Her hand came out, her fingers closing on my wrist. "Fool! To raise your hand against the goddess would mean your death by flaying."

Her hand still held my wrist and where she touched me my flesh seemed to burn, even as did hers. For an instant we stood eye to eye, scarcely breathing.

"A god, perhaps," she whispered, moving away to pace up and down. "I send you to kill a man. For many years this man has been as a thorn in the skins of all Philistines. I have vowed to my king that he shall die. I have made sacrifice. I have fasted. I have asked Ashtaroth for this boon."

Now it was coming out. She wanted to do what no other

Philistine could, to kill an Israelite with a charmed life. For this she would promise a slave from a dead city his freedom, if he could perform a miracle. To me it was proof of how weak are the gods that they must work through human slaves.

"And if she grants it? If she guides my sword arm to the fatal stab? What then, Delilah?"

Her tinted eyelids and long lashes lowered, then lifted. Greed burned at me through her eyes, and pride, and a deep, deep hunger for power.

"I shall be queen in Ashkelon. Shepthazzah has pledged his word."

I nodded. I could understand a woman like Delilah wanting to be queen in Ashkelon. Had not Helen yearned to wear the crown in Troy? For her sake, men had died by the thousands. I wondered how many lives must end to satisfy the hungers of this woman.

Her hands clapped together, imperiously. Dark shadows came to life near the heavy draperies hanging on the stone wall and pulled them shut against the fury of the storm. The shadows moved into the candle light, and now I saw that they were big Nubians, armed with bows.

They would escort me back to the slave quarters. At the doorway. I turned and looked hard at the woman in the misty garment.

"How do they call this Israelite?"

"His name is Samson."

I lay awake a long time that night, stretched on the thin pallet a foot above the stone floor of the lower temple. Moonlight filtered in through the narrow window which looked out, during the daylight hours, on the great square a few inches above street level. This was as good a bed as any I had lain on since that night when the towers of Troy went down in flaming ruin. Ah, but perhaps the scent of freedom in my nostrils lessened the stink of its rotted hides, its dirty straw, its worn leather ropings.

My blood burned in my veins. Freedom!

I lifted my big hands and looked at them, turning them this way and that in the moonlight. They were scarred from the slashes taken in battle, from the bruises suffered where a Greek shield broke two fingers. Yet there was a strength in them, a knowledge that by their skill in weaponplay I might yet walk the streets of Ashkelon without wearing the badge of servitude about my neck.

Samson!

The name was a song on my lips. I saw him going down, impaled by a long throwing spear. I saw him cloven from neck to chest by the edge of a fine Phoenician sword. I saw blood spurt from his eyes and mouth as a bronze dagger ripped into his belly.

I smiled and ran my hand through my closely cropped yellow hair, a heritage from my Thracian mother who had been a princess in Odessus before she wedded my father Amrath, cousin of Priam who was, upon a time, king in Troy. By the gods! Any god who gave me freedom was my god. This I vowed, my right hand balled into a fist and lifted high in the manner of the Spartans, who are great swearers of vows.

And I let my laughter soar out into the night.

As if in answer to that impious laughter the very earth groaned. Then my bed began to slide across the stone floor of my cell, its short wooden legs making scratching sounds, causing the short hairs on the nape of my neck to stand up and my skin to crawl. Never had I known such terror as I knew at this moment, half rising from the cot, staring wildly about me as the Temple walls shook and its floor heaved, listening to the deep voice of mother earth crying out so loudly that even the thunder of the storm became as nothing before it.

I remembered tales told of the palace of Minos of Crete three hundred years before, when the earth had bellowed like a gigantic bull. The ground had moaned and roared and shaken itself as if a bull imprisoned beneath were rushing about to seek escape. Great Knossos had fallen. Fire had come with the quaking of the earth and what had been the kingdom of Crete perished in two days and two nights of cataclysmic horror.

I put a bare foot on the floor. The stone was warm and it trembled as if there were life in it. My very bones seemed to ache in my fright. The anger of men I could face, but no man might stand up to mother earth when she showed her awesome fury.

And then—

There was quiet. The stone was firm, the bed ceased to move. The storm raged as before with its thunders and its lightnings and the flooding waters pouring from the sky, but the ground below was motionless. The tremor caused by the imprisoned bull was ended. Perhaps Theseus had come back from the Underworld to do battle once again. Perhaps mother

earth, in pity for us her children, relented in her anger. I do not know.

Was this another omen?

I shivered, remembering the night Troy fell, the same night my favorite horse fell dead under me as I was superintending the bringing of the Greek horse-statue within the walls of Ilion. It was that same night I saw my father cut down by a Greek hoplite stealing out of that massive wooden horse built by the wily Greeks and for which we Trojans in our madness had battered down our own walls so that we might draw it into our city. The head of the horse was the standard of Ilion. Perhaps by giving his life my own horse had tried to warn me. I had ignored the portent.

Would I ignore this shaking of the earth?

I covered my eyes with my palms, remembering.

My mother too, had died that night, a spear fixing her to a wooden door in her own bedchamber, watching Greeks raping to death my little sister Athala. I had come in through that same door while she was screaming, opening it without knowing her body was fastened to it by a bronze spearhead, staring in horror at the bed on which I had been born.

My arm had lifted. My spear whipped through the air. Two men had died fastened together on that single shaft. Then my bronze sword was out and flashing in the torchlight. Five Greeks died there in the bedroom that night.

I lifted little Athala in my arms. She was white, white as death itself, her tiny body broken and bloody. My eyes lifted past her, seeing my dead mother with her hands still clinging to the wooden spearshaft buried in her middle. I think I died a little myself, standing there with the only two women I had ever loved.

With my hands I placed them both on the bed and the dead Greeks at their feet. Then I caught up a torch and set fire to the curtains, the furniture of ebony and cedar, to the wooden lyre and the panpipes on which my mother and my sister had played.

I still held my blood-wet sword. I used it in the streets when I met a Greek. I know not how many I killed as I walked from our house close by the Megaron to the marketplace. When the bronze blade snapped, I fought on like a man in a trance, buoyed up by my hate. I hunted for Agamemnon and for Menelaus, but I found only common soldiers. These I slew without mercy, until I had come to the great breach in the walls which we in our folly had made for the horse.

Behind me, from the great wall as far as the marketplace, the city was a single flame. Tongues of fire leaped from the agora into the black sky, there to meet and mingle with flames from the many palaces that had been put to the torch.

Only in the streets was there any life, as women screamed and struggled while being raped and tortured, and in those places where a few last swordsmen made their stand. Strangely, I did not cry. I was looking at an end to my life but there was no grief in me. I think this was because a part of me was already dead on the funeral pyre where my mother and my sister burned. A dead man has no tears with which to mourn.

Still holding my broken, bloody blade I walked through the breach out across the great strand where the Greeks had lived these past ten years, where Hector had died, and Achilles. Here on these sands through which my sandelled feet now scuffed I myself had slain men and narrowly missed death, time and again. On foot and in my bronze chariot had I fought and killed. I hurled my sword back into the broken city and ran like a madman . . .

And now I was being asked to kill again.

I would kill, gladly and with laughter, if by killing I would win my freedom. Ah, freedom! Never again to know the lash on my bare back nor the bite of the goad urging me to greater effort. I need no longer fear the rising of the sun and what new cruelty, what exquisite pain it would bring, neither manacles for my wrists nor the smooth wooden handle of a grinding wheel for my palms.

I would walk where I willed, not where the bare feet of countless slaves had hollowed out a path before me. In the taverns I would drink the wines of Meroe or the barley beer for which the Egyptians are famous. With my teeth I would tear at roasted lamb or baked fruits instead of dry bread and rancid goatmeat. My belly would swell with eating and my veins grow molten with drink.

Aie, and women!

Suddenly my palms itched to stroke the smooth thighs of a soft Cretan woman or weigh the heavy breasts of a plump Greek girl. My lips quivered as if crushing the mouth of a lascivious Phrygian or the breast of a moaning Amorite.

For all this, only one man need die.

Samson the Israelite.

Two Nubians came for me in the first pink flush of dawn,

walking on bare black feet and clad in the spotted hides of leopards. They were big men but my yellow thatch stood taller than did their crinkly hair and the span of my heavily muscled shoulders was inches wider. In Ilion I had been considered a strong youth. Now that I was a man, I was even stronger.

I walked between them, along halls whose stone walls were painted over with scenes from the history of that island people from which these Philistines descended. Both Phoenicia and Philistia looked across the blue waters of the Inland Sea toward the mother nation, Crete. The bull worship at Knossos had degenerated, in Phoenicia and Philistia, into the decadent adoration of horned Dagon. No longer did youths and young maidens perform their athletic endeavors, twisting and leaping about with the great spotted bulls which were the special pride of Crete. Sacrifice and orgy had been substituted for clean sport and the joy of healthy bodies.

My eyes touched painted Minos on his throne, as I passed by those long walls, caught brief glimpses of the low, black sailing ships which Knossos had bequeathed to its colonies as their heritage, saw the Minotaur, red and terrible, breathing fire in its labyrinth.

Even my own Troy had been a colony of Crete at its beginning. Like Phoenicia and Philistia, it had broken from the land of the double axe, set up its own ruler, its own laws.

Bitterness lay acid on my tongue as we came from the shadowed halls of the Temple into the sunlit square, flagged and set with mulberry bushes and olive trees, with tiny altars before the statues of Dagon and Astarte. Round pillars, stained white, with red capitals and black bases, enclosed the garden. Above them was the intricate stonework grille of the Royal Gallery, which ran between the palace and the temple.

Delilah was waiting at the other end of the gardens, clad in the flounced bell skirt and wasp waist of the ancient Cretan fashion, with her firm breasts bared in honor of the goddess Rhea. With her was a heavy man garbed in a robe of the purple linen of Tyre, with a golden tiara rising above his iron grey hair, a girdle of jeweled discs banded at his waist. He watched my approach with keen eyes. I needed no man to tell me this was Shepthazzah, Tyrant of Ashkelon.

A black hand pushed me to my knees before him.

Shrewd eyes looked me up and down, then glanced at Delilah. In a surprisingly musical voice the Tyrant said, "This is the man you say can kill Samson when all other warriors have failed." He said it flatly, almost mockingly, so that anger

came inside my middle. I determined I would prove to this man that there were no warriors like those of Ilion, if the fates should allow.

His hand gestured, bidding me rise and stand before him.

"No man is as strong as Samson. How then can you hope to slay him?"

"With the lance. Or an arrow. Or a sword, highness."

Shepthazzah grunted and half turned, lifting his arm. Three men came trotting from the marble benches lining the pillared peristyle. They carried bronze-headed throwing spears, unstrung bows and arrowcases, with long swords in hide-covered scabbards.

"These men are the finest of my guards," the Tyrant told me. "Unless you can outdo them in weaponplay, you have no chance against Samson." He drew a deep breath and scowled. "I think you have no chance, anyhow, no matter what your skill with weapons."

He looked bored, as though this were a waste of his royal time that would be better employed at some other task of kingship. Delilah stared at me out of brilliant, tinted eyes in which I could read hope and doubt and a desperate reaching after miracles.

She was whispering prayers to the goddess, no doubt, as she watched me step forward and accept a spear from one of the bodyguards. It was a good weapon, balanced for the hand of a strong man, with a shaft of polished oak and a foot of sharpened bronze for its head. I put it and its fellow butt-down in the ground and watched two slaves run to hang targets from a wooden rack at the far end of the court.

They chose a round wickerwork butt, suspending it from a crossbeam on leather thongs. When they were done they stepped back between two wooden pillars well out of throwing range.

"Chrysax—throw first," directed the Tyrant.

This Chrysax was a big fellow with something of a paunch —from easy palace living, no doubt—but heavy muscles rippled in his upper arms and shoulders. He flashed a sneer at me, lifted a spear and hurled it. It went into the edge of the wickerwork target, making it sway violently.

"Equal that, slave," he grinned.

I looked at the Tyrant of Ashkelon. "Any dolt can hit that thing. Tell your men to hang the butt up again."

I hurled one spear, then sent the other flying after it almost in the same motion so that both shafts flew together

through the air. One drove into the crossbeam, cutting one of the thin leather thongs suspending the target. Its fellow cut the other, so that the wickerwork mark fell and rolled on the ground.

Delilah cried out, clapping her palms.

"Even Samson cannot prevent a spearhead from entering his middle," I said to Shepthazzah. "His strength won't avail him against good bronze."

There was a madness in me at the moment. I could almost smell my freedom, if I performed creditably. I snatched up a horn bow and strung it in one easy motion. Great Ulysses was the finest bowman I had ever seen. For hours on the walls of Troy, I had watched him, studying his way with this weapon. As I slipped the catgut string into the nock, bending the bow with my left arm, I drew an arrowcase toward me.

I fitted a shaft to the string and raised my eyes skyward. High above the garden a hawk glided in ever-widening circles. Up went my left arm, back came my right hand. The horn bow bent into a great curve.

As I say, a madness was in me, born of the mockery of the Tyrant and his sneering guardsman. "If the bird were Samson —what good would his strength do him against this shaft?" I cried

The bow hummed as I released the string.

Upward went the arrow, mounting higher and higher into the cloudless sky. Soon it was only a flashing needle reflecting back the sunlight.

The gliding hawk shuddered. Its wings folded. It began to fall.

"Horns of Dagon," whispered Shepthazzah.

A slave ran out of the garden. Within moments he was back, holding the dead bird with my arrow through its bloodied plumage on his outstretched hands. Awe was written large on his features as his eyes rolled in his head, looking from the Tyrant to me and back to Shepthazzah.

The ruler of Ashkelon smiled tightly. His hand went to the bird, touching its oozing blood with scented fingertips. Gently he rubbed the bloody feathers until the fingers were stained red. Then he held them out so that the sunlight made the blood glisten.

"Let this be an omen of the death of Samson, slave—and win not only freedom but great wealth."

For the first time, Shepthazzah appeared pleased.

Delilah nodded happily. No doubt she was seeing herself

seated on the horned throne of Ashkelon at this moment, resplendent in Tyrian purple robes and red gold crown. Well, let her dream. I myself was dreaming of walking into a wine tavern—free of the badge of slavery and with solid copper *manehs* in my pouch—and drinking myself to a stupor.

"Chrysax, see to him," the Tyrant ordered.

He swung about, nodding slightly to Delilah, and moved down the colored flagging stones, walking with a faint lurch to his shoulders. As kings go, he was a good man, I suppose. He did what he thought best for Ashkelon, which was all that could be asked of him. Thus Samson was a danger to his land, and so must be removed. Not for him to reason goodness or his right to send one man out to murder another. Priam had done for Troy what he thought best, as Agamemnon and Menelaus had for Mycenae and Sparta. Kings were above morality.

Chrysax roused me from my broodings, catching me in the ribs with the butt end of a spear. "You, slave—follow me."

When Delilah made a little movement of her hand, I waited. She was nibbling at her lower lip, her eyes anxious as they swung from me to Chrysax. Since her queenhood depended on my ability to hunt down and slay Samson, she became concerned about my welfare.

"He must have the best weapons in the armory, Chrysax. Let him do his own choosing. There must be no breaking lance shaft or untried bow to fail him when he needs them most."

Chrysax growled impatiently, "I know that, priestess."

Delilah frowned. "Nor do I want some simple jealousy between you two to interfere with our plan. Is it understood?"

The guardsman nodded. He needed no lecture on the fact that Samson was his enemy, and that his Tyrant and the high priestess would be well pleased if he came back with news that the Israelite would trouble them no more.

Delilah nodded nervously. Twice more she opened her lips as if to speak, then closed them and turned away. I watched her flounced skirt sway back and forth to her stride as she followed along the flagstoned walk where Shepthazzah had gone before her.

"All right, all right," grumbled Chrysax. "Let's go pick out those things you'll need."

"Will you be going with me?" I wondered as I fell into step beside him. He looked like a man who could take care of himself in a rough and tumble, though his paunch was greater than it should be in a fighting man.

"I suppose I'll have to. When Shepthazzah sets his mind to a thing, he fumes and fusses until it gets done. Now that bitch Delilah has put a bee in his helmet about a plan to murder Samson." He spat into an oleander bush bordering the path. "The only thing that'll ever kill the Israelite is old age. Not you, not me."

"I'll kill him—or die trying."

"You'll die."

His bland manner nettled me. I growled. "I've killed better men than Samson on the strand before Ilion."

"Greeks. Pah!"

"Achilles could have killed a dozen Samsons, as could Ulysses or Ajax. Samson! I'm sick of the name. What is he? A backwoods strongman. No more."

Chrysax chuckled in honest humor, "I wonder how he'll kill you, slave? Will he break your back? Or twist your neck about so that you'll look behind you on your way to the afterlife? I understand he killed a lion by ripping its jaws apart. Maybe he'll do the same to you."

"He won't get within hand's reach of me. Or if he does, it'll be with a spear or arrow in his gullet."

"I know, I know. You can handle him. I've heard that story before, Trojan. But only last week Samson was here in Ashkelon, killing thirty Philistine men—"

"And you let him get away?" I asked, incredulous.

Peevishly, Chrysax growled, "Easy for you to talk when you've never come to blows with him. The man isn't human, I tell you. He's big and strong and quick as a startled deer. Our blows never seem to catch him full on, but glancing, so that he shrugs them off with a laugh.

"Well, as I said, he was in Ashkelon. Something about a bet he lost—some riddle or other he gave the disappointed suitors at his wedding. They guessed the riddle, though Samson claims his wife wheedled the answer out of him and told it to them. In any case, he lost and had to pay. So he came here and stripped down thirty young men on our streets, then went back to Tannath, where his bride lives, with their garments."

I chuckled. There was something about this audacious Habiru man that appealed to me. Achilles had that same quality of indestructibility. His reputation had an opponent half beaten before the fight started. Luck always seemed to work for Achilles; a spear would be cast just as a chariot

wheel hit a rock, or a sudden summer squall wet down bowstrings when it seemed we had him cornered. Maybe Samson was the same way.

Suddenly I was eager to test my weaponplay against his muscles.

We turned in through a great double door of oak studded with bronze plates. Torches thrust into holders along the walls revealed a long, low-ceilinged room frescoed in brilliant colors showing Philistine kings hunting lions in their chariots, captives being led before another king for punishment, war scenes in which Philistines battled with Egyptians, with the horse people of Mitanni and the squat, bearded Hittites from the hill country of Phrygia.

I spent little time over these pictured triumphs, however; my eyes were caught and held by the glitter of polished gold and burnished copper, and by the sheen of jewelled shields, glittering swordblades and decorated scabbards. Like a child in a sweets stall, I was at a loss where first to put my stare.

A great Grecian helmet, crested with the black tail of a horse, a slim spear the haft of which was ebony, its point of beaten gold, a corselet of burnished bronze to which were riveted scabbard chains and a hook for holding a battle-axe: from one to the other my eyes wandered. I was dimly aware that Chrysax watched me, scarcely breathing; perhaps he meant to test my knowledge of weaponry by his silence; I did not know, nor did I care. My hands went out to fondle the curving klepesch of an Egyptian foot soldier, the handle of a double-headed axe. Ah, and swords! They were here by the dozen, both of bronze and of that metal, iron, discovered and put to good use by the Hittites five hundred years before in the days of their mighty ruler, Labarnas.

My hand wrapped about a hilt as I lifted a yard of polished iron blade into the torchlight. Its twin edges had been honed to the sharpness of a razor. Its hilt was a crossbar of bronze wrapped about with black leather and pommeled by a silver egg. It balanced so perfectly that my hand scarcely felt its weight.

"What king owned this?" I asked Chrysax.

His grin was wolfish. "No king, Trojan—but a god. That's the sword Gilgamesh used to kill the monster Huwawa."

I do not believe in the gods, though I think that where men's tongues make a god to walk, there once walked a man. Time has a habit of laying a gloss across fact, which renders it more beautiful at a distance, as time can mellow a certain

type of wine. If Gilgamesh had used this sword or one like it to slay a monster, then Gilgamesh had been a man at one time and the monster some awesome beast, for the gods need no such weapons as swords to do their killing.

"This I choose, then," I told Chrysax, and set it aside.

I walked to a rack which held spears. The gorgeous lance with the ebony handle and the gold spearhead I did not want; valuable it might be to an artist or to a man with greed in his soul, but it was no weapon to stand against hard use. I wanted a killing spear, not a work of art. One by one I took them from their wooden cradles and shook them in my hand. Two of them I laid beside the sword, satisfied with their strength and balance.

The bows were masterpieces of the bowyer's trade but I moved among them without any perceptible stirring of my pulse until I came to a length of dirty sheepskin which looked as if it had been flung into a corner of the room and forgotten. I lifted it, unwrapped the sheepskin and gasped.

The bow was over three feet in length, fashioned of thin strips of horn held together in some manner which was beyond my understanding, though tiny silver wires pierced the pieces here and there, adding their tension to the glue which bound the horn. Its entire length had been buffed and polished until it was a cold grey, with faint streaks of black trapped inside the horn.

"Whose bow was this?" I wondered.

Chrysax seemed evasive, shrugging off my query. When I grinned, he growled, "All I know for sure is, it was washed ashore not ten miles from here about a hundred years ago. Some people say there's a curse on it."

"What curse?"

Chrysax looked stubborn but finally grumbled, "The curse says that because of this bow a queen shall die, and because the queen shall die, so shall the king—and then nothing can save the house of Shepthazzah."

"Old wives' talk," I chuckled, and turned my attention to the horn bow. "I'll take it with me, Chrysax. Maybe if I kill Samson with it, Shepthazzah may let me keep it. Then I'll take it far away from Philistia and he need worry no more about the curse."

Chrysax only growled unintelligibly in his beard. He was a great growler, was Chrysax. Later I was to discover that it hid his shyness, as did his bellows of pretended anger and the sneer with which he greeted anything new or unfamiliar.

There were arrowcases from Egypt, from distant Scythia, from Mycenae and Crete, black lacquered quivers from Babylon and armored ones from Sheba. There was even a case sewn inside the skin of a human arm, still with the hand dangling limply from its base. The sight of it made my skin crawl; I think it came from Africa; The Libyans make good use of anything which falls in their direction.

I caught up a quiver of lacquered leather, all black with golden nails driven into the wooden frame to outline the design of the goddess Ashtaroth—lewd symbol and one inappropriate for a fighting man to carry, but it made me think of Delilah. If not for her I would now be grinding corn, with manacles on wrists and ankles. I was still a slave, but outwardly I was a free man.

I chose a shield and then a red leather corselet covered with thin iron discs, and a tall Greek helmet. Add to these metal-plated cothurns for my feet and calves, and I was as ready as I'd ever be to go hunting Hebrew strongmen.

"Now what?" I asked Chrysax as I stood in the sunlight holding all this gear in my arms.

"If you were a free man I'd stand treat to a bumper of barley beer newly off an Egyptian boat at Thyra's tavern. Since you're not—away you go to your slave's quarters."

With a parched tongue I licked my dry lips. My gullet hadn't known the cool, tart taste of barley beer since Ilion went up in flames Right now it was all I asked of life. Maybe Chrysax understood the misery in my eyes because he put a hand on my shoulder and, after looking around him, brought his mouth close to my ear.

"If you find a bladder of the stuff in your room later, know that Chrysax isn't so bad a fellow after all." He hesitated and his hand fell away as he looked sheepish. Then he grumbled, "I know what it means to thirst, slave. I crossed the wilderness of Shur with Shepthazzah in years gone by, when he was younger and took the field against his enemies."

He lumbered off into the sunlight without a backward glance.

I carted my gear to my little room. I must confess at this point to a stab of inner excitement at the sight of cothurns and corselet lying there on my pallet, all reds and blacks and polished metals, waiting to enwrap my body. It had been long since my muscles had known the weight of armor.

Nothing would do but that I dress myself in this borrowed finery. Off came my tattered loincloth, on went a new one

and over that the thick woolen kaunake which protects the skin from chafing. The red leather corselet, heavy because of its iron discs fitted to my chest, the cothurns to my legs, the helmet on my head. I peered at my room through the small eye ovals of the helmet, past the long noseguard. A foot above my head the high black horsehair crest waved in the light breeze coming through the tiny window.

I put the shield on my arm, snapped the sword scabbard to my corselet and hung the bowcase and quiver over my shoulder. Then I lifted the throwing spears. Exultation was a paean in my heart. This was how Cybele intended me to walk, armed against my enemies like a man. Was I not a Trojan? Blood brother to great Hector? I almost lifted my voice in the old warcry that had greeted the Grecian host at every dawn and sunset.

A gasp swung me around on a heel.

A girl stood in the doorway—one of the temple acolytes, in a thin linen gown—with her hand pressed over her heart. Eyes wide, she stared up at me in terror. Indeed, I must have seemed to her, since she expected only to see a naked slave on his pallet, a startling and frightening sight.

I parted my lips to speak, but the silly little fool whirled and fled back up the hall as fast as her slim legs would take her. So fast did she go that she ran right out of one of her rope sandals. It lay in the hall, mute and lonely, until I went and picked it up.

She would alert the Temple to my deed.

Of course, I could always excuse myself by saying I was merely trying on the armor, yet there was an uneasiness in me. Maybe it had to be blessed before being donned. Maybe I had violated some tradition and could be punished for it. In a world where there are many gods, there are likewise many customs. A man can break half a dozen of the most sacred ones unwittingly, but ignorance does him no good if once the irons are heated for the torture.

Then my hand tightened on the throwing spears. By the paps of Cybele! If I was a warrior, I ought to act like one. If I had committed a sacrilege, then let them take me for punishment who dared.

I advanced one foot and my chin lifted defiantly as the sound of pounding feet came to my ears. One spear I put in my left hand for ready grasping, the other I held loosely in my right, uplifted for throwing. In my mind's eye I saw two temple priests impaled by my spears, and then the bow

would be in my hand and the slim Phrygian shafts in my lacquered quiver would fly about their deadly work. When the arrows were gone—

Two priests, their white robes flapping about their ankles, skidded around the corner at a run. At sight of me, they slid to a halt and stared, eyes popping and mouths open. Then a slim hand pushed them apart and Delilah slipped between them.

She held a blue robe of Ammonite wool clutched to her by her fingers. Her hair was newly caught up in golden wires hung with bells, towering about her head in a graceful cone.

"Who—" she began, then swallowed hard. "Who are you?"

"The Trojan slave, Kharnos."

Her eyes closed and she swayed a moment as if in relief. But she straightened up fast enough to let me see the anger on her features.

"Must you parade around the Temple like a vengeful war god?"

I gestured at the door of my little room. "I was trying on the armor Chrysax and I selected. I did no more than that when the girl—"

"Talliya! That silly wench! She said—"

Amusement caused her lips to twitch. In the next moment she was laughing full-throatedly, head flung back, her left hand forgetting its duty as a brooch and permitting the blue robe to part enough to give me a glimpse of a firm dusky thigh and the deep swirl of navel in her smoothly fleshed belly.

"She vowed you were the war-god Baal come to life, breathing fire from your lips and lightnings from your eyes. Baal! Wait till I get my hands on that one. She's in my apartments right now, having a fit of hysterics."

She broke off her laughter, rubbed the mirth tears from her cheeks with the ball of her palm and studied me more closely. At last she nodded and beckoned me to follow her. The priests drew back to give me room, their eyes as round as ever.

At my every stride, the iron discs on my leather corselet clinked musically and the arrows in their case made a faint whisper with their feather fletchings. The chains suspending the hidecovered scabbard which held the sword of Gilgamesh jangled in the same rhythm. Delilah glanced wonderingly at me from the corners of her eyes.

"In a way I cannot blame poor Talliya. You look quite ter-

rifying in all that iron and leather. Your helmet makes you seem ten feet high. Is this how the Trojans dressed when you went out to fight the Greeks?"

"Just about the same, though my shield bore the horsehead of Ilion, as did the bow and lance cases strapped to my chariot rail."

Her eyes touched the symbol of Ashtaroth outlined in gold on the black leather of my arrow quiver and she laughed softly almost to herself. Before we entered the double door hung with brass which gave entrance into her apartment, she halted and put a hand on my wrist.

"This night Shepthazzah gives a feast at his palace. His son will be there—a crude, strong lout who fancies himself in love with me."

"If the son were to possess you before the father, Shepthazzah might not ask you to queen it beside him over Ashkelon."

She nodded gravely. "Jubaal is a haughty youth. He can't believe that a woman might not want to lie with him, especially after his wits—such as they are—become fuddled with strong wines."

Once again I was struck by her strange quality of helplessness. Every high priestess I had ever known—there were a few in Ilion and in Knossos who had been friendly with me—had been a proud, haughty woman. Delilah was proud of spirit, but there was a softness within her, as if she were caught in some strong current sweeping her toward a destiny she dreaded.

"Come with me to the feast, Kharnos. As my bodyguard."

She spoke pleadingly, not as a woman to a slave she owned. Perhaps it was the armor and the helmet I wore that made her see me as a man and not a dumb beast. Her upturned face was lovely. Not even Grecian Helen had been as beautiful as this woman, though all men thought Helen fairer even than Aphrodite. Or it might be that to my eyes she only seemed so, for some reason which I did not understand.

"If I raise my hand against the son of Shepthazzah, what will the Tyrant do to me?"

She smiled wryly. "Nothing, if you do him no serious injury. Jubaal is no pampered pet, though he's the oldest son of his dead mother and next in line to be king in Ashkelon. Shepthazzah knows him to be cruel and ambitious and mistrusts him."

I nodded. I must not injure Jubaal too badly, nor was I to

do it in the sight of other people, so that no voices could babble to the Tyrant about the shame that had been put on his oldest son. Alone and with only Delilah to watch, I might use my muscles on him, so that his tongue would be the only proof he could offer against me. The Tyrant could ignore that, passing it off as a drunken quarrel.

Delilah pressed my hand when she saw the assent in my eyes, and smiled happily. "Jubaal is no weakling, understand. No ordinary man could overcome him."

Foolishly, her words caused me to swell with pride. She had a way with her, did this Delilah, that made a man want to do his utmost to please her. I wondered as I walked after her swinging blue robe into her dwelling quarters, if doing what she asked might be the death of me.

TWO

The feast in the palace of Shepthazzah

The great palace of Shepthazzah had been built in forgotten times by the sailors of Crete, when Ashkelon had been little more than a fishing village on the shores of the Inland Sea. In time it had been added to and built upon until now it towered above the smaller, meaner houses that surrounded it. Its walls were tinted red and black and marked with great metal squares that held the faces of its dead kings.

Half a thousand pillars formed an avenue which led by way of a great square toward its marble facades and columned porticos. Ashkelon drew its culture, as did so many of these old Cretan towns, from the coastal civilizations against which the keels of their trading vessels scratched. The pillars were red sandstone from Aswan, carved with the lotus and papyri for the Upper and the Lower lands of Egypt; they had been installed in the days when the second Rameses had been conquering his world. The carvings of the kings which decorated a pediment above the great doorway recalled a time four hundred years ago when the great Hittite Mursilis and his hordes had come here before bringing proud Babylon to its knees. Mycenaean traders visited Ashkelon, as did the Mitanni and camel caravans from Assyria and Carcamesh. Each new arrival left a little of himself behind, reflected in this massive palace, its walled gardens and the great Square of the Many Pillars.

Troy had been such a city, though more worldly than any city in Philistia; our civilization was more Grecian in tone, because of its Achaean beginnings. Troy had been older, mightier, more breathtaking than Ashkelon.

These Philistines were a sea people who had appeared two centuries before, raiding and looting along the African coast. They had penetrated into the delta land of Egypt, then turned their keels northward toward Canaan. On the long shore which stretched from the Shur Wilderness as far as Cilicia and what was left of the Hittite empire, they had paused to rest and remained to conquer. They had overcome the Canaanites from whom the Habiru, under Joshua, had wrested Jericho and Gideon.

The Philistines formed a Pentopolis of their five great cities, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath and Gaza. Each city was ruled by a Tyrant, which is a king in their language. They called themselves Shardanians and they carried long bronze swords with amber hilts. Legend said they had migrated from somewhere north of a mighty mountain range along the amber route and through the pillars of Herakles. Once they had been hard fighters, but prosperity and good times made them soft. At heart, they were still barbarians.

Perhaps it was because of my lost heritage that I walked so proudly behind the litter in which Delilah was being carried by six giant slaves. In my own mind I was free, a Trojan warrior escorting the high priestess of Ashtaroth to a royal feast.

People turned and stared. I could hear their mutters, some of their comments. They recognized the gold and ebony litter of Delilah but me they did not know, so they gaped and gawked, muttering at the magnificence of my arms and, I like to think, my proud bearing.

After a while I heard Delilah laugh, a little tinkling sound in which was mingled amusement and irony. "If only you can impress Samson as much as you do the people upon whom he preys," she called. The white and gold curtains parted enough for me to see the curve of her cheek, the corner of her red mouth and a single, long-lashed eye.

Then we were in the cool shadows of the portico and Delilah was stepping from the litter, glancing at me and nodding. Drawing her white woolen cloak about her shoulders, she moved through the double doorway into a torchlit ante-chamber. Fat merchants and their wives, officers in the king's army, the many noblemen and women of Philistia came

to greet her. To me they said nothing but they looked my way more than once and I could read curiosity in their faces.

A tiny smile turned the corners of Delilah's mouth. She was enjoying the sensation I made. She took it as a vindication of her judgment of men, I supposed, for she herself had selected me. The others were impressed by what they saw, she knew; their favorable gossip would reach Shepthazzah within minutes.

A gong sounded and the leather-bound doors to the banquet hall swung open. As high priestess it was her duty to enter the room and bless it; as her bodyguard, it was mine to follow her.

A slave came with a golden bowl containing honey mixed with water into which she dipped her fingertips. After drying them on a bit of linen, she accepted a small lance—a toy, actually—which she broke as a sign that peace had come to this house. She lifted a platter of food in her hands and blew upon it as though cleansing it. And since Ashtaroth came originally from the sea, she accepted a goblet of salt water and took a tiny sip.

The ritual complete she moved toward the great dais which held the golden couch of the king and a matching table. A silver couch for the queen would remain empty to show that Shepthazzah was unmarried at the moment. There were smaller divans for the priestess and the high priests of Baal and Ashtaroth.

Delilah and the high priests took their places.

Trumpets blared. From another section of the palace Shepthazzah came with his great stride, a kingly figure in a purple robe fringed with golden tassels and belted by a jeweled leather girdle. His beard was newly curled and scented as was his hair, on which rested a thin circlet of gold set with rubies. His eyes blinked when he saw me and he hesitated, but said no word as he reclined on the golden couch as ceremony demanded.

The hall filled quickly, now. A babble of conversation and laughter rose on all sides. In the shadowed area behind the pillars, slaves waited close beside tables heaped with smoking meats and ripe fruit, with leeks, olives, and clusters of grapes from Eschol. Other tables groaned under the weight of fish and fowl and cuts of lamb, with steaming rice and onions. There was barley bread and cereals, and cakes made of rye or sesame. As slaves moved among the couches with

gold and silver platters, the guests made their selections and the eating began.

Of even more importance at a feast than food was the wine. Shepthazzah was the wealthy king of a wealthy trading city. He did not stint his guests. I saw white Mareotic from Egypt, the red wines of Elam and Carmel, expensive Coptic and yellow Taenotic.

Jugglers from Erythraea filled the air above the open space between the couches with flying red balls, with discs of striped black and white, with copper drinking mugs. Their skill was dazzling. Musicians came and seated themselves to one side of the pillared gallery that flanked the hall and made stirring music.

I divided my attention between the jugglers and Delilah. She had thrown back her white robe to make a coverlet on which she stretched her body. She was garbed in a gauze kalisiris after the Egyptian manner, belted at her slim waist with golden links, with a pectoral of golden plates about her shoulders. Her nakedness under the thin garment was clearly revealed, but she was no more shameless than other noblewomen at the feast.

It was the custom of Philistia, as it was of Egypt and of Crete, for women to reveal their bodies almost as if they had no effect upon men. In the northern countries, in Mycenae and in Athens where the air was colder, they wore more concealing garments. I have never been able to decide whether climate or personal modesty might be responsible for such variety in style.

My eyes ran over her shapely legs to her curved hips. A voice inside me whispered that this woman was not for me, that the high priestess of Ashtaroth was all but promised in wedlock to the king of Ashkelon, but my eyes paid scant heed to such caution. They stared as they would, and the more I saw, the higher leaped the blood in my veins. Once she glanced at me over her shoulder; she may have seen the fever in my eyes because she smiled faintly and pursed her ripe red mouth at me.

The jugglers ran from the square and now the musicians played softer, more sensuous music. A file of naked dancing girls ran on bare feet along the tiles and postured, arms above their heads. Slowly they began to sway, arms rippling, torsos writhing. They were supple, incredibly graceful, and there was an erotic overtone to their movements which made the

guests break off their talk and lean across the raised edges of their couches to watch with hungry eyes.

The girls were from Gades, a new Phoenician city in a land called Hiberna. They were known throughout the world as the finest—and lewdest—dancers to be found. Staring at them, I could well understand their reputation. Their smooth skins shone in the torchlight with a translucence that made them seem like pearl maidens, nor did they hesitate to reveal themselves in the intricate steps of the dance. It was an exciting performance. When the girls collapsed in graceful postures on the tile floor, the guests applauded and threw coins at them.

Delilah was looking back at me and laughing.

Her goddess was the deity of love, of carnal caresses and fecundity. I have heard Trojan philosophers theorize that the first men worshipped the fruitfulness of men and women because from their loins came the safety of the tribe in the form of stalwart sons and future mothers. In the rites of Ashtaroth, as with those of her sister goddesses Mylitta of Babylon and Astarte of Tyre, the love act itself had become a means by which to worship the deity.

And so Delilah laughed, understanding that after such a performance, Ashtaroth had put her mark on me. In a sense, I might be said to have been branded by Delilah herself, since she was the living image of the goddess. It was a pleasant thought.

The hours fled swiftly, and what had been a feast had now become an orgy. I saw the noblewomen of Ashkelon and wealthy merchants' wives baring their breasts and thighs to the caresses of their couch companions. Slaves were pulled off their feet, commanded to forget their humanity and perform like dumb beasts. Drunken laughter rose up on every side.

Delilah rose from her couch and threw her robe about her shoulders. Ordinarily she might have remained to urge on the guests in their devotions to her goddess, but all she could think of these days was the fact that she aspired to be queen in Ashkelon. It would not do for a future queen to conduct herself as might the lesser nobility and the merchant class.

Shepthazzah made an understanding gesture of dismissal.

I clanged my sword against my shield in a salute to him, at which he smiled pleasantly. Then I turned and went after Delilah.

When we came out into the Square of Baal at the end of

the Avenue of Pillars, the stars were high above with a crescent moon. It was very late. The city lay asleep around us and a cool wind from the city was refreshing to our flushed faces.

"I like to walk in the night," Delilah said, drawing her cloak closer against the chill. "I so seldom get the chance, except when the Temple gardens are empty and—"

A clatter of horses' hooves drowned out her words. She turned, curious, and I was taken once again by her regal beauty. She was a queen already, I thought; proud, serene, aware of her loveliness, of her importance.

A rider in bronze armor overlaid with silver dropped from the blanketed back of a sleek black mare. His head was crested by a Grecian helmet from which twin horns projected forward as though from his forehead. His face was young, fleshy. There was muscle on his body, arrogance in the way he carried himself.

"Delilah," he called. "I'm lucky tonight. I was afraid I'd miss you." He came forward, reaching out big hands to clasp her.

For a brief moment I was indecisive. Intuitively, I understood that this was the son of Shepthazzah, Jubaal. The silver armor alone would have been enough to speak his royal rank, but I saw the device of Ashkelon coiled on his helmet between the Dagon horns. To come between him and Delilah could mean my death by torture.

As I hesitated, the high priestess moved back a step.

"You're drunk," she said calmly.

Jubaal threw back his head and laughed. "I've swallowed a few mouthfuls of wine, yes. It's hot, dusty work, readying a punitive expedition against a subject who must be taught a lesson. You have to drink with your officers, let them know you're a good fellow. That way you build loyalty. It was cheap Cretan wine, too—not the expensive stuff. Besides, these palace banquets bore me. They're dull affairs until the women forget how important they are and begin acting natural."

"By that you mean like beasts."

"Beasts or women—what's the difference?"

"To me, a lot."

A big beryl ring flashed on his hand as he caught her wrist and drew her forward. I do not know whether he even saw me, he was so bemused by her beauty. "To you!" There was contempt in his voice. "A high priestess of Ashtaroth—

who is no better than a high-class harlot!—with the pride of a queen. You anticipate, Delilah. My father's a fool, offering you a kingdom when all he has to do is reach for you like this."

She cried out softly, in anger. There was no fear in her. She struggled a moment, then glanced back over her shoulder at me. I saw the loathing in her eyes at the crude caresses Jubaal was giving her, the plea for help. Until now I'd been waiting, unsure of myself. I had wanted to step forward, to hurl the Ashkelonian away; I only wondered whether this was what Delilah wanted.

Now I knew. I moved swiftly, gripping his arm and bending it behind his back. Off balance and taken by surprise, he dropped his hold on her and swung around. His hand went to his swordhilt and the blade came halfway out of his scabbard.

"Who's this plaything of yours, Delilah? Some foppish slave you've dressed up like a war-god to play at games with me?"

I relished the contempt in his voice. It made it easier to let go his arm, to push him away so that I had room to hit him in the face. My fist went six inches. It landed hard against his nose and mouth. There was a muffled crunch of mashed cartilege, of breaking teeth.

Jubaal gave a moan that was half a gasp.

He went backward so suddenly that his sandals made scraping sounds on the flaggings of the square. He lay there on the pavement, his nose twisted a little to one side of his face, his lips cut and bleeding. When they gaped open so that he could breathe more easily, I saw broken teeth.

"Get up," I told him. "Get up so I can kill you."

"No," cried Delilah. "By Ashtaroth—no!"

I remembered he was the king's son and put away my sword. I looked down at him, saw the fierce hate alive in his hard black eyes. I needed no Delphic oracle to tell me I'd made an enemy. He would never forget this night; every time he stared into a polished disc of silver, he would remember Kharnos of Ilion.

Delilah caught my hand, drew me away from him. She turned and looked at the palace as her tongue came out to moisten her lips. Her hand made a little gesture and then I saw the litter in which she had been carried to the palace, waiting for her. Its six bearers stood close beside its handles.

At her motion they picked up the curtained chair and walked off with it.

"Come," Delilah whispered. "If he rouses the guards and tries to follow, they'll go chasing after my litter. We can go this way."

She ran lightly across the paving stones. I trotted at her side. We went by narrow streets and alleyways until the palace was no more than a huge black bulk against the stars. Then she leaned against a building wall and breathed in the night air with relish, head thrown back and lips slightly parted.

"I haven't been so alive in years," she murmured after a time. "Not since I was an acolyte in the Temple."

"What will Jubaal do?" I wondered.

She had been confident that no harm could come to me through him, because of his father. The fact that she'd run from him herself made me vaguely uneasy. As if she sensed my worry, she put up her palm and stroked my cheek.

"Shepthazzah will laugh at him," she promised. "There's no love lost between this father and son. Shepthazzah hates Jubaal because he's a little afraid of him. It's Jubaal who goes into the field with the armies now, not Shepthazzah. The soldiers love Jubaal because he's as much an animal as they are. He'll drink and wench right along with them. If Jubaal should lead a revolt—you understand?"

I nodded grimly. I said, "Perhaps Shepthazzah won't want to push Jubaal too far. Maybe he'll order you to turn me over to him for punishment—as a sop to him, to prevent a test of strength between them."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "It's a possibility I won't deny, but I don't believe it. Right now Shepthazzah is powerful. He has allies up and down the coast, at Tyre, Byblos, Ephesus, Gaza. Jubaal has none as yet. He would welcome a fight with Jubaal now, perhaps not later. He'll defy him in this if only to prove his own strength."

She wound her slim fingers about my wrist, holding it tightly while she let her gaze go over my features. "And what of your strength, Trojan? Did you exhaust it against Jubaal?"

Something in her voice caught my attention. Her lips were parted and above the dark pools of her eyes her thin black brows arched inquisitively. She was womankind with the starlight in her eyes and Arabic perfume in her coiffured hair. Her heavy breasts pushed out her linen kalasiris, the

folds of her white robe. I put my arms around her, drew her to me.

My mouth sought her lips.

We kissed, pressed against the building wall. Her mouth was a soft fruit filled with rare nectar, a strong and heady wine that made a man know gladness simply to be alive. Her arms were bands that set fire to the flesh, her hands plumes of godlike incense that caressed and stroked until a man must tremble in the need to fulfill his manhood.

My arms tightened about her softness. My hands caressed her buttocks, pulling her against me. Then her palm came up to my lips. When I would have kissed it, she shook her head, eyes fierce and glowing in the night.

"Someone—no, many men come. Listen!" she breathed.

We could hear the tramp of feet, the clang of metal, a whisper of the leather aprons habitually worn by the fighting men of Ashkelon. From time to time we caught the dull thud of a lancebutt where it tapped the cobbles.

"This is the only thing I feared," Delilah whispered. "Jubaal coming on his own—to take vengeance by himself."

"By himself?" I asked. Many men walked beside Jubaal of Ashkelon. Delilah made an irritated movement with her head. She said softly, "I mean without the royal command. He hopes to seek you out—kill you—then brave his father's fury after the deed is done."

My hand would have pushed her into a run. I was willing to fight Jubaal and his roisterers, but not in a narrow alley with men free to come at me from three sides while I stood with my back against a wall. But Delilah set her feet stubbornly, like a Syrian ass.

The footsteps halted. A voice growled out a curse.

"They've disappeared. We'll never find them now."

"Aye, she ran with her pet while he still had his good looks. If he hadn't caught me by surprise—"

I stirred. Instantly Delilah put her hand on my arm in warning, digging in her fingernails. "—I'd have run my steel into him quickly enough! Gods, this face of mine feels as if it's going to fall off."

A sly voice asked, "If we catch them—what then?"

"I'll slice off his nose and hold hot irons against his eyes. Then I'll let him go to live out his days as a beggar." Harsh laughter scratched the air. "Or maybe I won't be that easy on him. I'll have to give it a little thought."

"What do we do now? Follow him to the Temple?"

"No. The bitch is high priestess and my father still fancies her as his future queen. There must be a better way."

"Samson'll take care of him."

"I tell myself that, but if by the luck of Baal he kills the Habiru, he'll be an important man in Ashkelon. A public hero." Jubaal chuckled, "Even I can't go about killing public heroes—we have so few of them."

"What, then?"

"Arphad," called Jubaal.

"Lord?" asked a man with a deep voice.

"You travel into Judah with Chrysax and the Trojan, don't you? I thought so. Then do this for me: after you leave Ashkelon and are well on your way into Habiru country, slip a dagger between this fellow's ribs. I will forego enjoyment at the prospect of his suffering for the peace of mind of knowing he's dead."

They spoke but little more, for soon we heard the sound of their sandals as they moved off into the night. Delilah stirred. She had been pressed against me, warm and soft. Even while I heard Arphad assure the prince of Ashkelon he would kill me without fail, my senses had been enthralled by the softness of her belly pressed to my loins and by her breasts hard against my chest. With a little sigh, I drew away.

Her eyes were troubled as they searched my face. "This Arphad—do you know him? No? Then I'll have him pointed out to you tomorrow."

I shrugged. "I'll know him without being told. Men who can be counted on to kill when their victims aren't looking have a certain air about them."

"Nevertheless, I shall point him out." She drew the white woolen robe closer about her, her face piquant under its hood, her eyes dark pools of mystery. "I want very much to be queen of Ashkelon, Kharnos. You are my hope for that. Once you destroy Samson, Shepthazzah will wed me before the statue of Ashtaroth in the Temple."

She turned and walked away. I followed as might a trained hound. The bond of danger which had united us for a while was severed by her abrupt transition from woman into high priestess. Perhaps she remembered that I was a slave and that she was my owner.

Or perhaps she walked as I did myself, a little in awe of this strange feeling which had come over me at her nearness. I am a mature man, no longer in the first flush of my

youth. I have possessed the women of many lands in Ilion, both free and slave. I am well acquainted with the passion that makes the body shudder and causes the breath to catch in the throat, yet never had I felt this tenderness, this hollow yearning which drew me toward the Philistine woman. It was something more than mere appetite, and I did not understand it.

2.

The Temple was deserted, its pillared porticoes darkly shadowed. Moonbeams filtering through the recessed windows high in the walls made pale silver shafts through which we passed. Delilah made no sound in her golden slippers, but my heavy military boots thumped solidly. The thought came to me that I followed after a phantom woman I could never possess.

We mounted the ramp to one side of the apse where the High Altar was placed. A gigantic statue of the goddess done in pure white marble from Paros towered high into the great dome, her basalt eyes staring blindly out over the great nave where her worshippers knelt in homage during her rites. A tunic of golden beads hung from her middle, leaving her bosom bare, tipped with massive rubies. As I walked it seemed her eyes turned in her motionless head to follow my every step. It was an eerie feeling.

Then we were in an upper gallery and moving toward the apartments in the rear of the Temple compound where Delilah lived. At any moment I expected her to turn her head and dismiss me. She said no word and I followed obediently, as was my duty.

Her own hand pushed open the hide-bound doors which led into her rooms. Torches blazed in wall holders and from tripods on the stone flaggings, bringing a hint of daytime brightness to the room. The white robe loosened, her hood came back to reveal her thick copper hair in its golden wires, then slipped away from her shoulders. With a hand she caught it, tossed it over a Mycenean chair.

Laughter lay in her eyes as she swung about to me, stretching out her white arms. "Come, Kharnos—put off that heavy cuirass, that big helmet. Forget you were a Trojan and be merely a man."

I smiled and did what she asked. She watched beneath long lashes as I placed the high-crested helmet on the floor

and lay beside it my cuirass, heavy greaves, my shield and baldric with its sword and scabbard. I wore only a short chiton now, and heavy hide sandals.

Delilah nodded, clasping her hands in front of her. "Three years," she said slowly and shook her head. At my puzzlement she smiled. "Three years without a woman, three years without paying tribute to Ashtaroth. It makes me shudder, especially when I think of Samson out there waiting for you."

Her hand caught mine, brought me toward a small statue of the goddess similar in mold to the giant woman in the apse below stairs. In the open patio I could hear a fountain splashing. Before the statue there was a shallow golden bowl of the type we in Ilion called a kylix. In it were the blackened remains of burned incense.

Delilah put her hand on a lump of natron and dropped it in the bowl. Then she caught up silver tongs with which to lift a coal from a stone circle in the floor where a fire glowed. Her thin brows arched as they looked at me.

"Incense? Or a better tribute, Trojan?"

My blood pounded. I knew what she meant. The sight of this woman stretching herself on the couch at the banquet hall, the naked bodies of the Gadean girls twisting and posturing before the guests, even the drunken conduct of the women of Ashkelon, had tuned my senses as a musician tunes his lyre. My flesh was alive, vital.

I lifted her off the ground and held her out at the extreme length of my arms. Her eyes showed surprise and an emotion warmer and more intimate than any she had so far revealed to me.

"You're strong," she murmured.

"I'm no Philistine fop, if that's what you mean. Have you ever had a real man, Delilah? I don't mean some rich merchant or some palace captain who thinks he can fight like Achilles. I mean a man who has worked in a grist mill as I have, who has fought to stay alive, to defend his city and his family for ten long years."

A shiver ran down her body. "I hate a braggart."

I grinned at her and put her back on her feet. My hand went to the thin tunic she wore and tore it away, leaving her standing naked in golden slippers and the gold collar above her protruding breasts. Her tonguetip came out to touch her lips. There was a faint flicker of fright in her eyes.

"Stop me if you're only teasing," I told her.

I did not show it, but I was afraid of this woman Delilah.

A secret part of me which until this night I had not known I possessed, wanted her even more than did my body. In a sense, I would have been happy had she slapped my face or screamed for her slavegirls to summon the Temple guards. There are more forms of slavery than are to be found on the auction blocks of a city.

She said nothing, only stared at me.

I undid the fastenings of my short chiton and dropped my cotton apron with it. Her eyes widened a little as her small white teeth bit into her lower lip. My hands went out to her, stroked her breasts and the smooth flesh of her sides down to her curving hips. Her eyes closed and she began to draw deep breaths.

The night was cool about us. Vaguely I sensed my surroundings as I continued to make love to her body with my fingertips, but it was in a dream or a scene on a painted cup from which one drinks his wine. The heavy draperies, the beaded curtains leading out into the patio, the splashings of the fountains were only a background to the loveliness of this woman who stood before me.

Where my hands had gone, I put my lips.

She moaned at the pleasure I brought to flaring life in her body. She quivered and her mouth opened to cry her delight to the room around us. No longer was she the high priestess of Ashtaroth but a woman—perhaps the first woman, the last woman, the only woman—and I worshiped her as men always worshiped the unattainable in their lives.

I caught her when she fell, her knees too weak to hold her upright. She lay flushed and soft against my body, eyes mere slits as she stared at me in swimming desire. She whispered something before she turned her head and opening her mouth, bit into my shoulder. Her long red nails were claws digging at my flesh. Her body began to move, to writhe against me, seeking solace.

The bed was only a dozen feet away but there was no time for either of us to think of comfort. Only this pleasant agony in our bodies mattered and the desperate need we had to savor it to the utmost. My hands slipped under her even as her arms drew me close.

We clung, shuddering.

I think a form of madness came upon us both at that moment. Or perhaps it is not wise for a mere man to taste a pleasure which should be reserved for the gods alone, if

there really are such things as gods. Sometimes I wonder. For as we clutched each other, we rose out of this Temple bedroom into some other plane where I was no longer a man but something stronger and far more powerful.

She screamed to my bellowing. Her flesh made fire on my flesh. I felt neither her teeth nor her fingernails, only the soft clasp of her arms and thighs and the convulsions of her body.

We fell apart when dawn was in the sky and a red sun peeped up over the balcony rail. During the night we had rolled across the floor so that we lay together before the black basalt stand that held the ivory figure of Ashtaroth.

The goddess stared down at us with ruby eyes.

I wondered if she were pleased with the sacrifices we had made to her again and again while that madness had been upon us. I turned on my side and drew Delilah toward me with an arm. She came easily, smiling a little, her lips tender.

"What queer twist of fate brought you into my life, Kharnos?" she breathed. "Before you came to me, I wanted only one thing—to be queen in Ashkelon. Now I don't know."

She gasped at her words and shook her head. "I'm mad! What happened between us was an offering to Ashtaroth, no more." She turned her head so that her long hair, freed of its golden wires flowed upon the floor tiles. "Still, I'm tempted to keep you here in the Temple with me and not send you out after Samson."

We both understood that she could not do that. Shepthazzah would ask embarrassing questions and might make some other woman his queen. Delilah was too rational to let sentiment stand before ambition. Nor did I blame her. There are some loves which are doomed to die before ever they come to full flower. I thought of Paris and the insanity which drove him to kidnap Helen from her palace in Argos.

Or perhaps only certain women are cursed by this dread fate.

Delilah ran her soft palm across my chest. "Go, Kharnos," she whispered. "Go, that we may accomplish both our destinies."

I rose and donned my chiton, my armor and greaves. She lay beneath the ivory statue watching me, lips smiling gently. Perhaps when she saw the way I looked at her she understood what was in my mind. The smile faded away from her lips.

She turned her face away.

I slept like a dead man until a slave shook me to wakefulness. My dreams had been nightmarish fragments in which Samson had been ten feet tall and muscled like a Cretan bull, with knees like rocks over which he had broken my back a dozen times. Delilah had been in those shards of vision, dancing erotically before blue fires but changing into cold marble just when my hands went out to clasp her.

I put on my armor and went to eat a breakfast of bread and onions with a little cheese. A trance held me in its grip. I walked like a man asleep. I ate mechanically, my jaws moving as do those clay toys sold in the Agora for little children, up and down and without meaning.

I walked through the sunlight on the flaggings of the Temple garden paths to a marble bench where Delilah sat waiting. There were no telltale rings under her eyes as there were under mine. She held out a little purse.

"Coins for your travels," she murmured.

She would not lift her eyes, nor do more than drop the leather bag into my palm. I do not know what I expected, some word perhaps, that might show affection or understanding, but she was as much the automaton as I. It may be that she felt as I felt; I think women hide these things far better than do men.

Chrysax was at the wall gate with three heavily armed men. He was sitting on a stone bench, chewing on a handful of dates. He scowled when he saw me.

"You had yourself a night, breaking Jubaal's nose."

"Oh, was that Jubaal?"

One of the men lifted his head quickly at my tone. Arphad? I let my stare go over him slowly. He was a big man, heavily muscled and with a deep chest, in better condition than Chrysax. If he got his arms around me in a bear hug, I'd suffer, but he looked slow of movement. My life might depend on keeping him at a distance.

Chrysax stood up. "All right, let's get moving."

I looked around me. "I thought Shepthazzah—"

Chrysax hooted good-naturedly. "What'd you expect—a royal farewell? I'll tell the king when we get back that you were disappointed." He looked at his three companions. "This is Kharnos. He's the one they think can kill Samson."

Arphad said, "He doesn't have long to live."

They all agreed with him.

3.

From the Temple gardens to the great marketplace, the Agora, was only a few hundred yards. We walked two abreast in the middle of the street, Chrysax and I in the lead, the men called Eshmun and Pharnak behind us with Arphad bringing up the rear. The people drew back at the sound of our clanking scabbards. We must have seemed like brazen men to them, tall and wide and strong. A pretty winegirl shrank away until her head touched a wall, following our progress with wide, fearful eyes.

Evidently Shepthazzah gave his palace guardsmen free rein in the streets of Ashkelon. The cries of his people made little impression on their king. It is a common failing of rulers, I have found.

There were many canopies hung on poles in the marketplace. Here the traders and the merchants were accustomed to meet, where potteries from Persis were displayed beside racks hung with Tyrian and Phoenician wool. Tables heavy with the statues and earrings, bracelets and jeweled collars of Hittite metalsmiths stood near benches on which were to be seen the ivory carvings of Phoenician artists. The foodsellers traditionally occupied the center of the great square, their olives, leeks and dates displayed in shallow baskets.

Voices lifted in the singsong of the sellers of meats and vegetables, of leatherwork and metal goods. We moved between the merchants, jostling them out of the way at times, for no man in Ashkelon was as important as the soldier upon whom the safety of the city depended. Those voices faded out as we approached, were silent as we passed, then rose again on our departure.

Movement to one side of the square caught my attention.

Where the brick slaveblocks were covered by a striped awning, two men struggled with a girl, dragging her up the ramp that led to the great dais. She was a pretty thing, with thick black hair and ivory skin. As we marched closer, I found my gaze attracted more and more to her. Something about her face—

I gasped. She looked almost like Delilah.

I broke stride. Chrysax turned to me with a muffled curse but my gesture silenced him. I stepped nearer the slaveblock, used my elbows on the crowd to come closer until the shadow of the big awning touched my face.

Chrysax was at my elbow. "Look, Trojan. If you think to lose us here you've made a mistake. We know your best chance to escape is—"

"Must you clack like a fishwife?" I asked. "I only want to see the girl."

Chrysax grunted. His gaze rose to the block and then he chuckled. "So that's it. A wench. Well, I can't blame you after being a slave for three years. You have good taste. Her I wouldn't mind myself."

I had a fat purse at my hip. Without knowing how much was in it, I intended bidding for the girl. The slaveseller came forward while two big Nubians held her by the wrists and tore away her simple garment.

The crowd relished this display of nudity. Men cried out in pleased surprise and everyone surged forward. Someone shouted out a bid for ten shekels. Another cried fifteen.

It was time I opened the purse. To my delight, I found it filled with golden circles stamped with the head of Shepthazzah. One of these pieces was worth a dozen shekels.

"Sixty shekels," I cried.

Such a high bid discouraged most customers. Only a fat man clad in an Assyrian brocade tunic draped with heavily tasseled shawls, his black beard curled and scented, called out another offer. Since he was obviously a rich merchant, I wondered how far my limited purse would take me.

I doubled his bid.

The Assyrian looked glum. He gave me a hard glance, then stepped back to run his eyes over the girl on the block more carefully. From her his gaze went to the pens behind the block where other women waited for sale. I saw his stare fasten on a plump Persian as his tongue came out to moisten his lips. He shrugged elaborately, looking bored.

"Let the soldier have the girl. I'll bid instead for the Persian." He turned away and fell into talk with an equally well-garbed Habiru.

I paid over the dozen gold coins to the auctioneer who motioned the Nubians to release the girl. She squirmed from their hands and lifting her dirty wool tunic, drew it down over her head. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright as she stared at me. I knew the sensations she was experiencing. I'd been sold as a slave myself not too long ago.

She hated me, of course. This is the first emotion you know when you have just been bought like an animal. Hate comes first, and then fear, wondering what fate your buyer

has in mind for you. A pretty girl knew almost exactly what her owner intended doing with her. A man might be bought as a laborer, as a house servant if he were pleasant to look upon or even, if the purchaser were a woman, for a more intimate use. An ugly girl would do household chores and other menial work.

The tunic came just above her knees. Her feet were bare, dirty. She put a hand to her fallen black hair and pushed it back so she could see me. I gestured and she moved across the block and down the ramp.

"Where's the manumitter?" I asked Chrysax.

He gawked at me. "Manumitter? In the name of Baal, are you setting her free? For this you paid twelve gold pieces?"

I nodded grimly. "Call it a whim, if you like." I swung to the girl. "Come along. I'll write you out a clay tablet, then sign it."

She stared at me, expressionless. She probably thought me mad. With Chrysax showing the way, we moved toward a small wooden table off to one side of the slave pens. A small man sat here, idly looking out over the crowd. It was the custom in seaport cities to place a manumission agent in the slave compound, for sometimes men and women were sold into slavery for debt and if the price of their service were paid by a friend or relative, and it covered the debt with interest, the buyer wrote out a manumittance and set the person free.

I waited while the man scratched out a few words on a damp clay tablet. I leaned over and made the Greek letters which spelled out my name. The man grinned at the girl.

"Just as soon as it dries, it's yours, honey."

The girl caught my hand. "Please, no," she said in halting seacoast Greek, which she spoke with an Egyptian accent. "No free me."

As a member of a noble family in Troy, I'd learned Egyptian along with my native tongue and a smattering of Hittite, Aramean and Assyrian. I said in the language of the Nile, "It's all right. You don't owe me a thing. You can go anywhere you want, now. Back home, if you'd like."

I opened the purse, took out a gold piece and put it on her palm. She looked down at it, shook her head violently and tried to thrust it into my hand.

"Please, you don't understand. If you set me free, someone will take me by force and break my clay tablet. He'll sell me back here again—or if not here, then in another city."

"There's no place for a girl where I'm going."

Chrysax came after me as I swung away from the manumission table and fell into step as though we'd marched together for years. For a while he was silent, thinking.

"You're insane," he said at last, heavily and with deep conviction. "Only a madman would pay a small fortune to set such a girl free. I'm beginning to have a little hope for you. A crazy person might be just the one to do away with Samson. I wonder why nobody ever thought of it."

A man laughed behind us.

It was Arphad.

THREE

On the plains of Shephelah

The road into Habiru country was broad and solid, for this had been a royal highway even in the days before Moses had led his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness two hundred years ago. During those two centuries they had taken to themselves the inner lands of Canaan, where they raised their flocks of sheep and conducted thriving business ventures in such cities as Hebron, Jerusalem and Jericho.

This was a hot, dry land. Its soil was rocky, barren, for the great waste of Zin thrust the fingers of its desolation this far north and west of its own boulder-strewn plateau. In the distance we could see as we marched along, the lift and drops of small hills covered by stone pines and dwarf junipers. There was sandstone underfoot, and where the wind had eroded the hills we could make out thin streaks of white limestone.

Only to the north, above this stretch of land called Shephelah, were there fertile valleys and grazing fields laden heavily with grasses, with wild millet and barley. It was toward northern Judah we were traveling, for Timnath lay in Judah and though it was a Philistine city, we expected to find Samson there. We stopped often to refresh ourselves at natural springs and rock freshets out of which cool water flowed as though by magic. We were in no hurry, I most particularly, the others because this was like holiday to them.

When the sun set beyond the Plain of Sharon, we made

camp. It was while I went with Arphad to gather wood for our fire that I saw a beryl ring on his finger. The last time I had seen this jeweled bauble, Jubaal had been wearing it; Arphad had been paid in advance for killing me.

I was wary of him. I did not turn my back nor did I place myself in a position where he could slip a blade into me without my being warned. If he sensed my wariness he did not betray himself, either by glances or by overfriendly talk to lure me off guard.

We ate the cheese and onions and barley bread in our kitbags and drank from a small wineskin which Chrysax had purchased just outside the city walls. We were weary from the long, hot walk. I know my eyelids weighed heavily and were inclined to droop but I was afraid to sleep until I saw Arphad rolled in his mantle.

I had not long to wait. These palace soldiers were out of condition. Their muscles must have been far more tired than mine, which were used to the long hours and hard fare of slavery. While I was taking a pull from the wineskin, I heard Pharnak snoring. Arphad looked at him, grunted, and wrapping himself up in his mantle, put his feet toward the fire and closed his eyes.

I went a little distance from the flames and scattered small twigs between the fire and the spot where I lay down. If anyone came seeking me in the night, he would step on them and warn me.

I was asleep almost instantly. . . .

A hand touched my face, moved lightly.

My eyes were open at once. I reached out with both big hands, thinking Arphad was upon me. At the same moment I twisted sideways, kicking out with my feet to avoid the knife thrusting down at me.

There was no knife. Instead my fingers closed on soft flesh and I found myself holding a woman, my right hand tightening on her throat while I ran my left along her arm to where I thought to find a dagger. She gave a little moan, no more, for my strength was great and her neck was soft.

Wide eyes stared into mine. It was the girl I had freed from slavery in Ashkelon. She lay against me, not moving. Her mouth was open as she gasped for the breath my choking hand denied her. Terror and despair lay deep in those eyes.

I released my hand, bidding her be silent.

Turning, I stared at the three men sleeping so heavily

around the fire, like the spokes of a wheel radiating outward. Eshmun stood with his back propped to a big boulder, snoring. Chrysax had named him sentry to prevent my running off, apparently.

I widened my mantle, drew the girl down to me and threw it about her. "Now then, what does this mean?"

She was rubbing her throat with grimy fingertips. Twice she licked her lips before she could speak. "I was afraid. I stole an ass and followed you."

"Little idiot! What am I to do with you?"

"I can cook. Sew torn garments. Please let me stay."

She looked almost exactly like Delilah in the shadows and red light from the campfire. A dirty Delilah, streaked with dust and the remains of tears on her cheeks. I lifted my hand and stroked her thick black hair. Under the dirt, she was a pretty thing. Her skin was dusky with the faint redness of an Egyptian ancestry.

"A man followed me when I left the slave market," she whispered. "He meant to take me for himself. I ran and hid in an empty oil jar. Then I knew that what I feared was true. I have no family, no friends, no one to turn to. Any man who wanted could break my clay manumittance tablet and claim me for his slave. Can't you understand? He could sell me or keep me for himself."

"You'd rather be with me?"

She nodded soberly, her eyes still frightened. There were bluish marks on her throat from fingers. I bent and kissed them sleepily, nuzzling into her soft flesh. She expected me to take her, for she stirred against me. I pushed her lightly away.

"I'm tired, wench. Go to sleep."

She wriggled herself back against me. I put my arm around her and held her close. Just before I fell asleep, I thought how good it was to be needed this way, to be looked up to as a protector.

2.

The smell of meat roasting over a bed of coals awakened me. I lay a moment, warm inside my mantle, before I remembered the girl. I turned and rose to an elbow. She was crouched at the fire, a long stick dug into the ground and bent to support a chunk of lamb.

Chrysax and the others were standing at a little distance,

staring at her. When he saw me awake, Chrysax came and stood over me, jerking a thumb at her.

"Is she going with us?" he growled.

"Why not? Did Shepthazzah say I wasn't to have a woman?"

"Well, no," Chrysax admitted, and scratched his head.

I threw aside the mantle and rose to my feet, stretching. "If I kill Samson, what difference does it make if I enjoy myself beforehand?"

"None, I suppose."

I grinned at him. "Besides, the meat smells good—wherever she got it—and if you want to sample her cooking, she's got to go along wih us."

I think it was the meat which settled the matter, especially when the girl sliced off a chunk and held it out to him. Chrysax mumbled something and bit into it. He chewed steadily, looking pleased.

We sat around the fire and finished the meat which, the girl informed me, had been in a pannier strapped to the ass she'd stolen, together with two big jars filled with wine and half a dozen loaves of wheat bread. We made a feast of it, and the sun was high in the sky when we set out again for Tinnath.

Samson had a wife in Tinnath, a Philistine woman whose father was a rich farmer. I was a little surprised that a Habiru had taken a foreign woman in marriage, for the Habiru people are closely knit in such matters, believing that foreign blood weakens the racial strain. Samson, however, was a man who relished foreign women.

"Always he's been attracted to the women of Gath," Chrysax said as we strolled along. "Sure, his family doesn't like it, being old fashioned about these things. Samson, though—it's like a compulsion with him. Maybe he thinks our women are glamorous. Or maybe those Habiru wenches are too commonplace for him."

My eyes were on the girl where she sat her stolen beast, body swaying rhythmically to its choppy stride. Her woolen tunic was torn and dirty. I told myself she needed a new one, for I could see the flesh of her back through it.

"Whatever the reason, he's taken Asherbath to his bed and calls her wife," Chrysax went on. "Shepthazzah didn't like it when he heard the news, I can tell you that. Bad enough Samson is our enemy without his being able to come and go in our cities whenever he pleases."

"Come and go? Doesn't his wife live with him?"

"Not her. Asherbath has things too cosy at home to go wandering off with her strongman husband. She and Samson have a little house where they live when he comes visiting her. Between times, she entertains her lovers. Or at least that's what the gossip says."

"These lovers you speak of—are they the ones who guessed the riddle Samson gave them?"

Chrysax hooted. "Not by their own brains, that's for sure. Asherbath wheedled it out of Samson—he's a fool where women are concerned—and told them the answer."

"And to pay the bet he came into Ashkelon and stripped thirty young men of their clothes."

"That's right. You can imagine the uproar it caused."

"No wonder Shepthazzah wants to be rid of him."

"You do it for him, you're a hero."

I tossed one of my spears high. "I'll do it, Philistine. With this spear, if I can get within throwing reach of him. Or with an arrow from my bow."

The girl turned at the sound of my voice and smiled over her shoulder. She had found a brook during the morning and bathed herself. I had to admit she was a pretty little thing who might be beautiful with better clothes and some of the unguents with which rich women anoint their faces.

I moved forward to walk beside her.

"I don't even know your name," I smiled.

"It's Mahthys. I come from the city of On, a few miles north of great Memphis. My father was a scribe for the Pharaoh and we lived well. Too well," she added, making a wry face, "for when my father died he left many debts. His creditors sold me and my two brothers into slavery to pay back some of their loans. I was bought first by a Cretan landowner, a rich man with two daughters for whom I became a companion. I taught them the Egyptian tongue and played on the lyre for them."

"You shall play for me when my task is done and I'm free to go where I will." As I spoke I wondered if I would be alive to listen to music after meeting up with Samson.

"I'll like that," she nodded.

After a while she began to sing in the Egyptian tongue. Her song had to do with a boy and girl and the Nile River in flood; when its waters closed in around them they did not mind because they had one another. I thought it rather silly. I was used to the Greek ballads that celebrate love, but theirs is a love molded by passion and strife, sudden

death and battle. The Greeks are a younger people than the Egyptians; perhaps their youth is reflected in their songs.

We were moving through a region of grey stone and limestone hills covered by sparse grass and a few sycamore trees. The hot sun was blistering, drying out both the land and the men who walked its face. In the far distance, when we reached the crown of a low hill, I made out the glint of sunlight on water and thought this might be the Dead Sea, which I had seen on maps in the library at Ilion years before.

A flash of movement caught my eye.

"Lions," grunted Chrysax at my elbow. "There's a lot of them in this wilderness. I often wonder how they manage to live. The sheep are grazed further north but I suppose there's game here no hunter ever sees."

I could see the beast now, a magnificent male with a thick black mane. It stood atop a rock ledge and watched us, tail lashing quickly back and forth. My hand tightened on my lance. I had hunted these huge cats on the plains of Troad and knew the fury of their charge, their strength, the raking sharpness of their claws.

Mahthys looked nervous. If a lion came for us, it would go first for the ass where Mahthys sat. She had no desire to be there when the beast made its leap, paws flashing downward to break the ass's neck. I came and walked beside her, putting a hand on her thigh to reassure her of my presence. As though to let her know I would stay beside her for a while, I hung my big shield on one of the wickerwork panniers.

It is exhausting work, striding along on a rock floor with a hot sun overhead which turns the land around you into an oven. The sweat drips into the eyes and the mouth opens to gasp at air that, when it reaches your lungs, sets them on fire. My feet ached. Tiredness laid crippling fingers on my legs. My cotton chiton was a thin white mist through which the sun poured its searing rays. My armor I had long ago put aside, for to touch it meant to burn the skin.

Late in the day, Chrysax decided we must be less than five miles from Tinnath. The sun was setting and a redness lay upon the ground. To the east the hills called Hebron rose up between the coastal plain and the Dead Sea We were about to pitch camp here when the ass tossed its head and brayed.

"It smells water," I said.

At a sign from me, Mahthys let its rope bridle slip from

her fingers. The little beast trotted toward a slight incline covered with great boulders. When it disappeared beyond a rock jut, I went after it.

Just beyond those rocks was a pool of clear blue water and tiny clusters of blue and purple thistle, a few evergreen shrubs with broad, thick leaves, and some thorny maquis bushes. It was an oasis of sorts hidden by nature from the sight of wanderers traversing the smoother valley floor.

I shouted to the others, then went and lay face down and began to drink my fill. For once I forgot that my back was exposed to the knife which Arphad carried in his sash, and let the cool water run down my throat.

I saw my hard, bronzed face reflected in the pool waters. The sun had bleached my already yellow hair until it clustered, shaggy and crudely cut, about my head like pale gold. My grey eyes glittered like those of a lynx; there were pain lines at the corners of my mouth, but there were also furrows of laughter at the eyes. The gods had given me a sense of humor with which to smile at the fate that had made a slave of a Trojan prince.

The ass had moved forward in the water, bobbing its head and making blowing sounds with its lips. I came to my knees, reached out a hand to catch the trailing reins and lead it away before it muddied the water. With my hand outstretched, I glanced at my polished shield which hung on its straps from a wicker basket.

In the shield I saw Arphad.

Sword above his head, he was running silently across the rocky ground, face hard and lips twisted in grotesque effort. I lunged forward instead of turning, throwing myself under the belly of the ass, at the same time twisting my baldric around and closing a fist on my swordhilt.

Arphad splashed into the water after me, missing my skin by inches with his desperate swing. I landed on my side, turned over quickly and rose to my knees, then to my feet. Across the ass we faced one another, breathing harshly. A glance told me the others had not yet come around the jutting rock.

Arphad slapped the ass on its rump and the animal moved out of the way. Now we stood less than three paces from one another. Our swords were broad of blade and two feet long. Arphad still carried his shield; mine was strapped to the ass. Evidently the Philistine thought he had all the better of it

because he advanced through the water quickly, confidently, a big grin on his mouth.

"Don't look for help from the others, Trojan. Pharnak and Eshmun are Jubaal's men. Chrysax has a dagger at his throat to stop him from making a wrong move."

His sword lashed out at me, cleaving the air with a savagery that told me Arphad wanted to get his killing over with so he could lie down and cool himself in the water. I parried it, watched sparks fly as the edges grated, telling myself that even if Arphad carried a shield and still wore his battle armor, I was unencumbered by all that metal and could move faster, more easily than he.

I parried and backtracked, playing for time. I brought Arphad out of the water onto the bare, rocky ground where the heat could bake his sweating body even more, now that he was fighting. He rushed, I sidestepped. He feinted, I moved back. From time to time I varied my tactics, rushing him, meeting his blade with my own in a metallic clangor that ran loud in this red haze of late afternoon.

I made our fighting a bright, terrible thing as I slashed and drove overhead and sidelong blows at Arphad in such a manner that his shield was of little use to him. Always I attacked to his right. The one time he lifted the big oval targe of wood and hide and metal, I came close to shearing off his left leg at the knee. After that he was more cautious. He let the shield cover his left side and devoted his swordplay to meeting and parrying my blade.

His face was red, his mouth hung open.

It is hot work, fighting inside a bronze cuirass and holding a heavy shield on your left arm, especially under a Syrian sun. I could hear Arphad gasping even above the din our blades made as they clashed. After a time the muscles grow stiff when taxed by over-exertion. They refuse to respond to the commands of the brain, as if molded out of lead. Arphad was beginning to suffer.

He opened his mouth and yelled, "Eshmun, Eshmun!"

I laughed at him. My sword went in and out. I lifted it, moved it in an overhand blow for his head. Desperate, he raised his sword and his shield together.

I fell to the ground, landing on my left hand and the toes of my extended left leg. My right knee was sharply bent. I thrust forward in this lunge and drove my broad blade upward under the upraised shield.

The point went into Arphad just below his bronze cuirass

and above his groin. It slid easily through his cotton chiton and sank into his belly to the hilt. Twisting too late to avoid a return blow, I wrenched my sword free of his middle and fell into the water. His edge had cut my upper arm. It stung as the water touched it. I scrambled to my feet.

Arphad stood with bulging eyes staring blindly, the blood making a red froth at his open lips. Every man believes he will live forever, that no matter what the danger, death will not come for him but for his fellow. Arphad was fast losing this belief. He groaned, closing his eyes and dropping his sword and put hands to the gaping wound in his lower abdomen.

He fell face down on the ground. His body quivered and jerked convulsively. He gave a little cry, then was motionless. I covered him with rocks, then led the ass away from the water and tied the rope reins to a rock. With my freshly cleaned sword in my hand I went around the jutting rock and stood there.

Chrysax was sitting on a boulder, his head in his hands, Eshmun behind him with a dagger touching his throat. At sight of me, Chrysax looked up and gave a deep sigh. Pharnak had Mahthys backed into the rock wall, his knife at her belly. When she saw me she gave a happy little cry, pushed Pharnak away and came running.

I caught her in one arm while I looked at Eshmun and Pharnak. "Your companion's dead. I ran a sword through his guts."

They looked at one another. Pharnak shrugged. Eshmun put his dagger in its scabbard. No sooner had it clanked home than Chrysax was off the rock, aiming a terrific blow at the man, hitting him on the side of the head and dumping him to the ground.

"That's for putting a dagger to my neck, you dungheap! Try it again and I'll slice off your ears and make you eat them!" He looked over the fallen man at me. "Thank Dagon you're all right. If I went back to Shepthazzah and told him I'd let you get killed before you had your chance at Samson—"

He shivered and spat.

Eshmun was rising, eyes fixed on his leader. There was no fight in him; he'd let himself be bribed to keep Chrysax out of it, believing Arphad when he said it was a personal thing between him and me. Something of this he muttered in his black beard.

Chrysax glowered at him, then plodded forward up the

little slope. "Where's the water? My throat feels as if it's been swallowing fire all day long."

Pharnak spread his hands and attempted a smile. "I too believed what Arphad told me."

"Do I have to watch my back with you?" I snarled.

I told them how Arphad had tried to murder me when my back was turned. Chrysax made a rude noise and looked past me at the others. "I'll watch your back, Trojan—until you meet Samson, at least. And afterward, if you kill him."

Pharnak moved closer to Eshmun. As if to show their good intentions, they made a heap of their weapons, then moved after Chrysax to drink. Mahthys pressed closer against me, watching them until they were out of sight.

Then she turned and flung herself against me, rubbing me with her body like a temple harlot, panting softly, whispering, "I was so afraid, so afraid! If anything had happened to you, I'd have killed myself, Kharnos. I swear it!"

At a time of battle, I have noticed that women are quick to ignite at the touch of a man. It may be the way of nature to perpetuate the race so that more males are born to take the place of those slain in combat. Nor was I insensible to her arms about my neck, the movement of her mounded belly, the brushing of her naked thighs on mine. I bent my head, found her lips with my mouth.

We quivered together as our tongues touched.

Her body stiffened, drew away. With wide eyes she stared at her hand where it had brushed my upper arm. Her palm was covered with blood.

"You're wounded! Oh, Horus—have mercy!"

"It's nothing. A flesh cut only," I laughed.

She made me sit on a flat rock while she searched the thickets for herbs and ran to the waterhole to wash them, then bind them to my arm with nimble fingers and a strip of torn linen. As she worked, I grew aware of the brush of her unbound breasts against me, the touch of her bare legs to my thigh.

When the bandaging was done my hand went to her thighs, stroking them. As my palm moved upward to her buttocks she gave a little cry and fell against me, grinding her mouth to

"Do you want to? Now? Out of sight of the others?"

I grinned and pushed her away, coming to my feet. "Later, little one. Right now you're too thirsty to be much good to me."

She opened her lips to protest but I clapped her rump and turned her toward the waterhole. She gave a yelp, then laughed and ran up the slope, yanking up her tunic as if to give her more room for running but actually, I am sure, to let me get a good look at her handsome legs. They were long and firmly curved, and her thighs flexed at her every step. A picture came to me of Delilah.

We drank our fill, then immersed the waterskins until they bulged to overflowing. Pharnak began a fire, Eshmun opened the wicker baskets on the ass and brought their contents to Mahthys. She chopped up what was left of the meat, added some herbs which we found growing in a wild state not far away, and made a very palatable stew.

We gorged ourselves. Mahthys sang us a few songs and then came to slip into my arms where I placed our blankets. She was very silent, not like her usually gay self. The stars were bright, high above. It was very quiet.

"It's this man you're going to fight, this Samson," she told me suddenly. "Pharnak told me about him while—while you were killing Arphad. He's going to kill you. I—I wish you'd run away with me right now, before morning comes."

"Hey, there!" I chuckled, shaking her by a shoulder. "What makes you think Samson's any different from Arphad? He has the same flesh, the same blood. The one I can cut, the other I can make to flow."

She shook her head glumly. "Not Samson. He's a Habiru and the Habiru have a very strange god. My grandmother told me tales of their Jehovah when I was a girl in On. Of Joseph who served the Pharaoh Rameses, of Moses who led the Habiru out of Egypt to freedom in Canaan."

She talked on, telling me something about a plague of locusts and the waters of the Red Sea opening to permit the Habiru to pass through and then closing on the chariots of the Pharaoh. A pack of nonsense, I thought it. The dying of the Egyptian firstborn, the rage of Rameses, the years of plenty and the years of privation, all were of a sort. I listened and I drowsed. After a little while, I fell asleep.

Toward morning I awoke. Mahthys lay close beside me, her black hair loose and pillowed on my chest. My body was refreshed and vigorous. It felt the round weight of her breast, bared where her tunic had slipped away. I put my hand on her breast, caressed it gently. Mahthys stirred and murmured. Her fingertips came up my chest to touch my lips, to stroke

them. Sleepily she opened her eyes and her mouth formed a smile.

"I was afraid you found me unattractive," she murmured.

She wriggled, twisting, drawing her tunic upward over her head, tossing it aside. Naked, she crawled on top of me, catching my shoulders in her hands, opening her lips and taking my mouth, squirming over me. Her flesh was hot and dry and there was natural fragrance to it.

I told myself she was only an Egyptian slavegirl, but she looked so much like Delilah it was like drawing the Philistine woman into my arms, like kissing her warm mouth, like reliving the ecstasy of her body. We were half asleep so that our loving was lazy and sensual, demanding but gentle, fiercely tender. It went on and on, for I could not get enough of this woman. It was as if I were joining my body to a part of myself that had been missing for all the years of my life.

"Give me your son," she breathed in my ear.

Her body went on moving slowly, gently, until my hands searched her flesh, caressing the hardened breasts, the warm hips and supple thighs. Her pace quickened as she gasped, calling on her Egyptian gods. Above me her eyes were closed, her mouth open.

"Kharnos," she whispered. "Kharnos, please."

"Why do you want my son?"

"To have something of you I can cherish after—"

"After Samson kills me?"

She nodded frantically, unable to speak for now the convulsion sacred to the great goddess was seizing her, ripping her flesh apart with exquisite sensation. Her head bent slowly as if it were too much weight for her neck to hold. Her forehead rested on my shoulder, her fingernails clawed in my arms.

She gave a low cry and her body went limp.

I drew the blanket tighter about us both.

In the morning sunlight Mahthys was standing above me, slipping into her tunic. A quick glance showed me that Chrysax, Eshmun and Pharnak were still asleep. Mahthys laughed at me, thrusting out her tongue.

"Did you think I would show myself off to—them?"

I lay back and looked up at her, seeing the lovelight in her eyes, the satisfied smile on her pouting red lips. The night had been good to us both. I felt renewed in my manhood, alive to the world around me, and I knew she felt the same.

My hand caught her bare ankle. "Mahthys, I don't intend

to let Samson kill me. I—" She bent down and covered my lips with her soft palm.

"Do not speak of it," she whispered, her face troubled. "He is a man who draws his strength from Yahweh."

"I draw mine from my weapons," I grinned.

"It isn't enough," she murmured and wriggled free. She went to the fire, poked at the coals, then covered them with small twigs until flames were leaping up. Then she moved to the basket where she had put what was left of our evening meal, a few pieces of meat, a little bread. She turned and looked back at me over a shoulder saying, "Neither is this enough food."

I rolled out of the blanket and reached for my bow and arrow-quiver. Strapping them on my back I slipped into my baldric and picked up both spears. "I'll go see what I can find. There may be a family of hares nesting in the high rocks or even a deer waiting for us to leave before it comes to the waterhole."

I moved away from the camp. It was cool this early in the morning, for the sun was low in the land of Moab beyond the Dead Sea, making long black shadows among the rocks where I walked. A lizard streaked across a broken stretch of ground and darted into a hole. Overhead a bird made lazy circles in the air, also hunting food.

A parched land, this Canaan, barren and filled with rock and sand. Remembering the fertile plains and valleys of Mysia where Ilion had stood, I marveled that anyone would want this for a home. As far as I could see, and I stood on a high ledge with my hand shading my eyes from the rising sun, there was only arid desolation.

I moved on, walking among the rocks for perhaps an hour.

Then I saw two lions crouched down, their stare intent on something below them. A deer, I thought, one of those little animals which are said to abound in these parts. I lifted one of my throwing spears. If they'd found our breakfast for us, I'd have to get rid of them before killing the deer.

My arm went up for the throw.

The male lion went off the rock in a soaring leap, roaring savagely. At the same instant I saw a man walking below, head bent. At the sound of that awesome roar he looked up, startled; I had a brief glimpse of a bearded face, wide shoulders and a powerful body wrapped in the skin of some beast; then the lion covered him and he went down, rolling over and over.

My hand still held the lance but I had forgotten it.

I watched, scarcely breathing, expecting to see the man disembowelled, to see his blood spraying across the sands. The lioness was gathering her haunches, quivering, inching forward on the rock ledge where she crouched, snarling fitfully. Once she joined the battle, the man was surely done for.

The weight of the lance recalled me to my senses. I took a step and my arm shot forward. The lance went out in a curving arc through the air, a flashing length of glittering metal and wood. As if she sensed danger, the lioness came up from her crouch and turned her head.

The lance drove into her. She sprang high off the rock, screaming in pain and fury. Twisting her tawny body, she tried ot rake the impaling shaft with her claws, screamed once more, her body convulsing, and then lay still.

I had unwrapped and strung my bow without taking my eyes from the lioness. Now I put an arrow to the string and drew it far back. I dared not risk a shot as yet, for the man and the male lion were still battling furiously. Somehow the man had made it to his feet, was slowly backing away from the lion toward a sheer stone abutment where he might plant his back. The lion was clawing at him, making red marks down his thigh. If I shot I might miss the lion and hit the man.

The animal was roaring, great screams of fury that shook the very ground. My admiration went out to the man, for never had I seen anyone rise to his feet after being knocked down by such a beast. Twice on the Mysian plain had I saved hunters from death, running to the lion that had them down and driving my spear in its side. Alone and unaided the man must die.

I called encouragement down at him. "Try and get free so I can get a clean target." He heard me, glanced up and smiled, shaking his head as if amused at my folly, to think I could kill a grown lion with a single arrow.

He dodged a flying paw, went in under it and around to its back, his body tight to the tawny hide so that he did not give the beast anything at which to claw, once having missed its blow. The lion was upright with the man behind it. I had my opening.

The bow bent. I released the arrow, watched it soar.

The man had both arms behind the forelegs of the animal, was drawing them backward, his hands clenched behind the maned neck. His muscles stood out in mighty ridges. My arrow

drove between him and the beast just as the man exerted his full strength, standing on bowed legs and with his back hunched far over.

The lion went limp.

I gave a shout, went bounding down the rocky hillside with great leaps. The man was half on the animal, half on a knee, gasping hoarsely. Sweat covered his huge, hairy body. His hair, long uncut and held in a rawhide thong that had come loose from his efforts, hung about his shoulders. It was thick and glossy, curled and scented. As I ran toward him the man shook himself, rose to his feet and began tying up his hair in the thong.

"You're lucky," I shouted. "If I hadn't been out hunting, you'd have died."

His smile was friendly as he gestured down at the beast. To my amazement I saw the muscular forelegs of the lion bent at an odd angle. The man said, "I broke its legs, then its neck." I was quiet, staring at him. Only one man was strong enough to kill lions with his bare hands: a man named Samson.

As if he read my thought, he nodded. "Yes, I'm Samson of Zorah, the Nazirite. I see you've heard of me."

He was a huge man. From the rock ledge I had not realized just how tall, how broad, he really was. He towered a full head above me and I am considered a tall man. Though I have broad shoulders, his must have been more than a yard wide. Nor was any of his body fat. He was muscular, with the skin stretched so tight that every time he moved, one saw the muscles ripple. A great bearskin—that of a Syrian bear—came from one shoulder downward over his chest and middle and fell to his upper thighs. The paws were crossed at his middle, where a small leather bag was held by a wide belt studded with brass triangles.

Nowhere could I see a weapon. He had supreme belief in his own strength, I gathered. What Samson could not do with his bare hands could not be done, even with the finest sword or lance ever made. I told myself this was my opportunity. All I need do was draw my sword—I'd left my other lance, my bow and quiver on the rocks above—and run it through him.

I made a wry face. I was no assassin to slink after a man in the night and slay him. I would go back for my weapons and follow Samson and, face to face with him, I would kill him as I had promised.

I drew the arrow from the neck of the lion. It was unbroken so I cleaned it, hunkered down in the sandy soil, running it

back and forth to wipe off the blood. Samson stood staring down at me.

"What is your name? You're neither Habiru—nor Philistine!"

"I'm a Trojan. Men call me Kharnos."

He held out his huge hand. I stared at it, then turned away. I could not clasp in friendship the hand of a man I meant later to kill. He gave an odd sort of chuckle, turned on his heel and went striding away toward the south. I shaded my eyes from the sun and watched him, marking the way of his going.

Retracing my steps to our camp, I saw a young hart bounding from rock to rock. Almost instinctively I hurled my spear. It was a perfect cast, the metalshod shaft driving into the animal behind its left foreleg.

I carried it over my shoulders as I came into camp. Chrysax and Mahthys had been worried about my long absence. Mahthys was delighted by the little deer and called Eshmun and Pharnak to help her skin and disembowel it. Chrysax went away from me but stood studying my face. After a time he came over and lifted one of my spears. He studied it.

"You killed more than the deer this morning," His finger made a tracing where some of the dried blood of the lioness was caked.

"I killed a lioness which was about to join its mate in attacking a man."

"This man—where is he?"

"The last I saw him, he was walking north."

Tinnath lay northward, I remembered suddenly. Chrysax grunted and scratched his bearded jaw, curious and perplexed. He sat on a flat rock and watched me as I put a high polish on a spearhead.

"The man didn't die when the lion attacked him?"

I shook my head. "I put an arrow in it. Before then or maybe at the same time, he broke its neck."

Chrysax was on his feet, eyes wide. "Horns of Dagon! If you're telling the truth—"

"I know. It was Samson."

"And you let him get away?"

"Only for a little while. I know which way he went. I mean to follow, to have it out between us."

"You could have killed him then."

"Could you, Chrysax? To strike an unarmed man with your sword after you'd just helped save his life? If you can, your mettle is none of mine."

"You're a fool, Kharnos."

Mahthys called to us, and I went to accept a thick steak and munch on it contentedly. Chrysax was glowering at me, off to one side as he ate. Eshmun and Pharnak paid neither of us any heed. They were watching Mahthys. I told myself that if Samson killed me, these two would come to blows over the Egyptian girl.

When we were done eating, Chrysax said heavily, "Kharnos found Samson this morning. He's on his way to Tinnath." They all look surprised and displeased; Eshmun and Pharnak exchanged startled glances. Mahthys shivered and drew closer to me. I remembered what she had said during the night about my dying very soon.

I gathered my weapons together. "He wasn't walking fast. I'll overtake him before the sun goes very far."

Chrysax nodded in satisfaction. "We will follow after you to make certain that you do, man of Ilion. Eshmun, Pharnak—go you before me. Keep Kharnos always in view."

Mahthys put her hands on my wrists and pressed against me, looking up into my face. "Don't leave me here, take me with you." I put her aside gently, telling her I could not, that I must go alone because on this depended my freedom.

She wept a little but I made my heart hard. There was no place for sentiment within me, not until I killed the Habiru strongman. I lifted my spears, my bow. I had already donned my silvered cuirass, my great helmet. My shield was strapped to my left arm.

I walked into the morning, northward.

Behind me, I heard Eshmun and Pharnak following.

3.

For three hours I moved across this barren land until I came at last onto a narrow road that twisted downward from the mountains of Judah toward the distant city of Tinnath. I could see white walls and the tops of palm trees, a well where women were filling water jars, but this was in the distance. Closer at hand, walking steadily like a man whose mind was elsewhere, I beheld Samson.

I grounded my spears, cupped hands to my mouth.

"Samson, wait! Samson, Kharnos calls."

He paused and turned, watching as I approached. The sun was hot overhead, for it was less than an hour past noon and my body was wet with sweat inside my armor. I shifted one

spear to my left hand and hefted the other. It felt light, delicately balanced and ready for the throwing.

I walked forward slowly.

When I was less than a hundred feet away, I called, "I've come to kill you, Habiru. If you want me to come closer so you have a chance to get at me with your hands, I'll wait."

He said nothing, just stood there, big and hairy in his bearskin garment. He was like a rock, immovable and immutable. I raised the spear. My arm went back and I shifted my feet for the throw.

I stood without moving, frozen to the ground.

I could not do it. The shaft seemed fastened to my fingers. My arm dropped and I let the spear fall to the ground. A terrible fear was on me, not fear of Samson, for he made no threatening gesture. But somehow I knew that to slay this man would be a crime against—

Against what? His god, Yahweh? Fate itself?

This was nonsense. Or worse, madness.

I drew my bow and strung it, put an arrow to its string. Back I drew the feathered shaft until it brushed my ear. The arrow was aimed directly at that great chest covered by the bearskin. All I needed to do was open the fingertips by which I held the fletching. And—I could not.

Let go the arrow, you fool! Just open your fingers. The bow and the arrow will do the rest. The string is stretched to breaking. It will drive the shaft right through his body! Do this—and be free!

The bow slipped from my lax fingers. The arrow flew from the string and skidded across the ground making a deep furrow in the sandy soil. Behind me I heard Chrysax bellow in rage and the sound of feet drumming along the ground.

I turned. Eshmun and Pharnak were making for me, swords out and naked in the sunlight, shields clamped to their forearms. I knew they were running to kill me as they had been commanded.

I could not move a muscle.

BOOK TWO: The Book of Samson

FOUR

Outside the walls of Tinnath

The sun was hot on my helmet and my silvered cuirass. I wondered as I waited for death to come to me, if it had baked the brains in my head. Beyond Eshmun and Pharnak I could see Mahthys struggling in the hands of Chrysax and hear her screams, too. I could not stir a muscle. It was as if I stared into the awesome face of snake-haired Medusa.

"Defend yourself, Trojan!"

The words were bellowed from behind by Samson. They rang in my skull as though it were empty, like pebbles rattling around inside a gourd. But they dropped the veil from my eyes and made my muscles stir to life.

I lifted my shield, caught the sword Eshmun drove at me, turned it aside so that its edge took a sliver of metal with it. My blade I lifted to parry the cut Pharnak aimed at my side. I fell back two steps, once more alive and eager for the fray.

For a brief instant I marveled at my former lassitude. Never had such a helplessness come upon me. Mahthys would say it was the work of this Habiru god, Yahweh. She claimed he had strange and marvelous powers. It was no ordinary spell which had befallen me, of that I was certain.

I had no time for further thought—

Our blades clanged together. I thrust at Eshmun, saw him skip sideways, banged my shield into Pharnak and caught him by surprise. He went reeling back two steps. I leaped after him, sword jabbing, felt the shock of the thrust as its edge took him in the side.

Eshmun was on me, wildly swinging. I knew Pharnak to be wounded but how badly I could not judge. He knelt in the dust, bent over with his hands clutching his bleeding flesh, but he was still alive. A live enemy is a dangerous one even

if wounded, so I let Eshmun push me away from his companion.

Mahthys screamed a warning.

Chrysax was pounding along the road, spear held loosely in his hand, coming to join his fellows. His arm went back, I parried an overhead slash by Eshmun. The spear was flying at me, a length of deadly, sharpened bronze and wood. The wound Arphad had put in my arm was painful; I realized that I must have burst its edge for I could feel the trickle of wet, warm blood down onto my wrist. It was hard to dodge either the spear or Eshmun's flying blade.

I raised my shield to the spear as Eshmun came for me. When my blade parried the sword as the hardened point of the lance ripped into the shield, its force slamming me off my feet. I fell into the dust. Eshmun leaped after me, sword held out, point forward.

Cybele! Mother goddess, protect—

I twisted. The sword went into the ground, scratching along my cuirass. I dropped my own sword, brought both hands around the throat of Eshmun, yanking him down onto the pebbles and the gravel beside me. His fingers went around my wrists while my thumbs drove deep into his windpipe. We locked together, straining. I did not care if Chrysax was above me, sword raised to impale me. All I could think of was this bearded man trying to kill me. My thumbs went deeper into his flesh.

His breathing was a whistle in his throat, then nothing. His eyes bulged horribly and his mouth was an open red gash in his face. I tensed my muscles even more. The hands at my wrists fell away. Eshmun jerked twice, three times, then went limp. A moment longer I held my grip, but he was dead.

I rolled over and sat up.

Chrysax was standing but he was helpless in the grip of Samson whose forearms were under his armpits, both hands locked together in back of his neck. This was the same grip he'd held on the lion, but here there was no mane to hide it. Chrysax was hunched forward like an old man, face purple, his fat body sagging weakly.

I heard the crack of his breaking neck. It was like a snapping whip in the still, hot silence of the day. Samson opened his arms. Chrysax fell face down in the dust and the pebbles and lay still.

Samson looked at me. I grinned up at him.

Chuckling, he held out his hand, helping me to my feet.

His face darkened. "You're wounded. You'll need salves and bandages, but we can find them in Tinnath at my house there."

Mahthys advanced slowly, haltingly, eyes enormous as they stared at this man whom she believed so favored of Yahweh. She sidled past him, scuffling dust with her rope sandals. To her eyes, accustomed to the more civilized Egyptians, Cretans and Philistines, this backwoods Herakles must have seemed a wild beast. But he had a good face and kind eyes, dark blue, and there was mischief in them.

Samson bared his teeth and growled much in the manner of a bear; Mahthys yelped and leaped, clinging to me and peering at him past my upper arm. The man began to laugh deep within his chest. Mahthys giggled, then laughed full-throatedly herself, head thrown back; but her fingers still held to my cloak.

His hand came out, palm up. Mahthys sidled past me, went to him, eyes searching his face. "I am your friend," he told her in his rumbling speech. "Just as I am friend to Kharnos, your man." He hesitated, glancing from the girl to me. "He is your man, isn't he?"

I said before Mahthys could speak, "She is my woman, Samson, if by that you mean we belong to one another." Mahthys nodded and her words spilled out as does water down a cascade. "Yes, yes, I'm his woman, and—and he is my man."

He turned from her, bent and picked up Chrysax, tossed him onto a shoulder. Then he moved to Eshmun and to Pharnak, grasping their bodies, dragging them through the dust to the side of the road and up a rocky incline to a hill where great boulders lay piled one atop the other. Here he dropped them with some clanking of their armor.

"The jackals will feast tonight," he said when he rejoined us. To him the death of three Philistines had been no more than another incident in his endless warfare with them. I had done some killing of my own in the past. If this was the custom of the Habiru I would accept it. As the saying went, "When in Crete, run with the bull." I shrugged and put a hand on Mahthys' shoulder.

"Our paths part here, Samson," I said.

He looked surprised and faintly displeased. "You can't leave me yet," he protested, "you're wounded and—"

"Wounded?" breathed the girl, all tense concern as she studied my reopened cut. "It's bleeding again! Now see what

you've done. Here, sit down—no, over on this fallen tree. I'll have to put on a new bandage and fresh herbs."

"There will be salve in Timnath," Samson murmured.

"There are some herbs in the panniers. The ass! Oh, where'd that little devil go? He knew I'd need him sooner or later and—"

Samson raised both huge hands. They were as wide together as a small shield. "Please, girl. I'll go get the beast."

When he was out of earshot, Mahthys leaned close. "What are we going to do now? I hope you aren't one of those romantic idiots who thinks he has to go back to Ashkelon because of some fool promise he made."

I laughed at her, "My only promise was to try and kill Samson. I tried. I failed. If I failed, Chrysax and the others were to kill me. They tried and failed in turn. I am now a free man—as free a man as you're a woman. Are you going to leave me now, Mahthys?"

For answer, she slipped her hand inside my tunic and stroked my flesh. Devil-fire glinted in her dark eyes, and laughter. "You told Samson I was your woman. I hold you to those words." Her fingernails pinched so that I yelled.

I was answered by thunderous laughter. Samson stood on the road, the ass slung across his great shoulders, smiling down at us. "I like to see people in love. I have a wife in Timnath, myself."

He put down the ass, then sat beside me as Mahthys busied her fingers removing my old bandage, attending me with herbs and fresh linens. The more I saw of him, the more I understood this Samson to be a plain man, a child in spirit though not in mind.

There was a basic simplicity in him that joyed in natural things, and to him a woman was a beautiful thing fashioned by his God for the enjoyment of man, to be loved and caused to bring forth children. He had no use for trickery or slyness, which were as abhorrent to him as was senseless cruelty to most men. I think he drew his strength from this inward peace, though he always claimed it was because of his hair which, as a Nazirite, he was forbidden to cut.

He insisted that we accompany him to Timnath.

"I want you to meet my wife, Asherbath. You'll like her. She loves a good time, laughter, music, singing" I remembered what Chrysax had said of her, how she entertained lovers while Samson was away in his Judean home at Zorah, but I said nothing. He rose and stretched so that he looked

like some earth god of olden days, black beard bristling, the wind blowing the dark brown hairs of his bearskin. "It is still a long walk. We must go past Tinnath itself to the hills beyond, where her father has his house."

I kicked dirt with my toes. I liked Samson. It came hard to open my mind to him, but there was no other course. I put my hand on my arm, found the pain had abated and that the linen pad was firmly in place. Mahthys was beside the ass, folding over the linens and restoring them to their proper place.

"Samson, I cannot go with you. It is not that I do not like you, for I do. But a woman of Ashkelon sent me out to kill you in order that she might be queen of that city. When you were dead, I was to regain my freedom."

I told him about my life in Troy and how, when I was found senseless and half out of my mind from grief and wounds, I was sold into slavery by those who found me. He listened without speaking. Mahthys came and crouched before me so I could put my palm on her black hair and stroke it. She watched the big man, her eyes never leaving his features. There seemed to be a breathlessness in her as if this moment might be a turning point in her life.

He stirred at last, lifting his hands from his thighs where he had clasped them, giving a deep sigh. "Sometimes I think the actions of a man's life are like the sands in an hourglass turned by the hand of Yahweh. As He wills them, they fall all in a certain way through the opening in the glass, so that they may accomplish some divine purpose."

"You really believe that?"

He nodded. "I do. The great men among our people—Abraham, Moses, Joshua—have spoken with Him, have heard and obeyed His commands. We others—we common ones—can only go about our affairs knowing that in some manner Yahweh wishes us to do what must be done that we may accomplish our destiny."

"But why? Why?"

Samson moved his massive shoulders in a shrug. "What man knows the will of Yahweh? All anyone can do—even as Abraham, even as Moses—is follow out His orders."

"You bear me no ill will, then?"

"None. It was ordained that you came seeking me, perhaps to serve a higher purpose."

I threw my sword in the air and caught it as it flashed. "You make me out no better than the dog that runs in the

wheel to turn the spit above a fire, Samson. I claim a man is more than that, that with his sword he can carve out his own destiny, not be dependent on a god's whim."

"That may be as you say. We shall not argue. Only come with me to Tinnath."

I glanced at Mahthys. She was smiling, eyes half closed in imagined pleasure. In her mind she was seeing new garments on her body and copper baubles in her hair, enameled earrings for her ears and bracelets for her wrists. She was tired of the plain woolen tunic, of dirty hands and grimy feet, bared except for their rope sandals. In Tinnath there would be a bath and pretty gowns, all manner of finery.

"All right, we'll come with you," I nodded. "We have no other place to go, it's plain. Troy is a burned ruin and Egypt lies across the seaway."

Samson clapped my shoulder, almost felling me. His laughter was as thunder in the air. Mahthys held both hands to her ears, stamped her foot, then catching Samson by his right hand and me by my left, she led the way down sloping road away from the high rocks where the Philistines lay dead in their armor.

The little ass came trotting along behind us.

After a while, Mahthys began to sing.

2.

Tinnath was a Philistine city. Not as large as Ashkelon, Gath or Ashdod, it was important in a small way, for it lay in the heart of the fertile plain that bordered the long coastline. Its high walls were of white clay and dried bricks, the twin pylons that supported its huge oaken gate being marked with the horned thunderbolt wrought in glittering brass. A stream of people and animals moved in and out of the open gateway, for this was market time in Tinnath and the farmers from the plain and lower foothills were abroad, together with the city merchants.

"We'll find Asherbath's father, Ganithod, in the market square," Samson told us. "He comes to town every third and fifth day of the week when he sells his olives and the grapes for which his vineyards are famous."

We took our place in the crowd behind a small cart laden with figs and apricots, in front of two men who bore sacks of leeks and onions on their broad backs. On either side of the gate, small booths formed of four poles and a thatchwork roof

had been set up where men dealt in herbs and melons, cucumbers and garlic. Here also a man might buy a bronze knife or razor, a fly-whisk or a loincloth.

The outer market was a cheap one, intended only for the poor. The wealthier people of the city and the merchants who shipped goods overland to cities like Beersheba and Hebron could afford to deal within the walls. The smell of onions and of bread freshly baked in clay kilns was in the air. Potters were patiently turning their wheels while their wet fingers shaped the clay into graceful forms. Beside them, the workers in metal hammered out an ornament or a bit of cheap jewelry.

People thronged around the booths, holding out small copper coins called *manehs* after the custom of Babylon. I saw one lady in a striped tunic draped with tasseled shawls, a little black boy behind her holding a sunshade over her head. A female slave carried a leather sack from which she counted coins in response to her mistress's orders. I gathered that the lady of the house was shopping for her many slaves; quite obviously, she mistrusted her steward.

Samson was as good as a detail of soldiers in making a path for us. The people recognized him, I could see, for they gaped and drew aside, whispering one to another. There was fear in all their faces; I could understand that, since Timnath was a city of Philistia, and Samson was a foreigner in their eyes and an admitted enemy. In one or two faces, especially those of women, I read pity, and this I could not understand.

We went in under the great gate, where guards were lounging in the shade formed by a tattered awning. They sat up and looked worried when Samson went through, reaching for their weapons. Me they gave curious glances for now I wore my full armor, fearing to leave it on the ass because of the sneak thieves in which all cities abound. Mahthys pressed close against me as if to let the world know she was my slave. In her plain woolen tunic nobody would take her for anything better.

Between houses of brick with flat roofs and wide stone steps leading upward on their outer walls, and along dirt streets we walked. Timnath was no city such as was Ashkelon with its paved avenues and flagstoned squares. It was a backwater town with a wall around it, a pause on the camel road between Egypt and Damascus, Carcamesh and Babylon.

We came into the city square to find it filled with traders. Here were displayed ingots of Arabian copper, iron from Babylon, frankincense from Sheba, goatskins from Scyros, oil

and almonds and even a few magnificent Thessalian horses. Mahthys exclaimed over a stand where ivory combs were sold, and would have stood and stared at tiny golden ear-drops carved by the craftsmen of Sidon, had I not caught her wrist and dragged her after us by force.

Samson was standing in an unoccupied section of the square wall when we came up to him. His face was drawn, worried. "I cannot understand it. Always Ganithod comes to the marketplace. It is even more of a religion with him than his worship of Dagon."

He began to ask about his wife's father but all he got were shrugs and evasive glances. No one knew a thing, or if they knew, they kept it to themselves. No man can get in trouble who keeps a still tongue in his head, they reasoned, so they spoke no word but only made empty gestures with their hands.

Samson gnawed his lower lip. "It baffles me. There's something wrong. I sense it but I do not know what it is. And no one will tell me anything."

"Why not go and find out for yourself?"

Samson nodded slowly. He put a hand to his belt and brought out a few silver shekels. "I intended to buy my wife a gift, some trinket or other. She has many of them, but what woman ever thinks she has enough jewelry? Mahthys, help me select something."

Mahthys was delighted. She ran to the jewelry bazaar and began fingering rings and brooches, exclaiming over each one. A pair of earrings shaped like urns and fashioned of gold wire and blue enamel caused her to lift them high, then hold them to her ears for me to admire. Samson brooded, being far away in his mind and worrying about his wife. When Mahthys selected the urn earrings for his gift he merely nodded and reached into his belt pouch to pay for them.

"You select a trinket too, Mahthys," I told her.

Her eyes opened wide and her mouth pouted a kiss at me. Her hands went out without hesitation and lifted a silver bracelet from a tray; it was a circlet set with two blue stones; turquoise, I think they were. As she slipped it on her forearm I saw tears in her eyes. I believe she hoped I would buy something for her; in anticipation of this, she'd already selected the silver bracelet. Now she wept with happiness. Women, I thought; and chuckled.

Samson was impatient to be away. We followed after him through the market square and out the open city gates. He

walked swiftly, without a backward glance. The thought came to me that already he had forgotten us.

We saw the smoke first, black and coiling upward, blown by the wind. It lifted from the villa we could see from the crown of the little hill some miles outside Tinnath. The vineyards were on fire, their wooden posts and the cross-pieces which supended thick vines, with their heavy grape clusters, blazing red and the smoke roiling into the blue sky as might that of a burnt offering.

Sunlight flashed on the helmets and armor of the attackers. We could see unarmed slaves and servants running through the fields, cut down by swords and lances though they screamed for mercy, and women struggling in the arms of those who would rape them and afterward sell them from some slave block.

"Is Philistia at war?" I wondered.

Samson shook his head. "Those are Philistine soldiers attacking the villa. Why, I do not know." He began to run down the hill like a madman, shouting in his bull voice.

Mahthys was sitting on the ass, holding the reins in her hands. She stared across toward the burning fields and the men running in the furrow with lighted torches. "Poor Samson, poor Samson. To come home to this."

I strung my horn bow and patted my full quiver. Samson was a good distance away and running faster. I could hear him shouting, but his voice broke in mid-bellow as if he sobbed. "I've got to help him," I said to Mahthys who only nodded, eyes sad and withdrawn.

I ran down the road toward the flatlands.

Ahead of me Samson came up to two men with torches. The torches he ripped from their hands and slammed their heads together. They fell as if poleaxed; later, I found their skulls had been crushed as if they had been no more than eggshells. Samson ran on, found two more men and did the same thing to them.

Men saw him coming and ran away.

Only armored soldiers dared stand against the hairy man, I realized. I drew an arrow from the quiver, put nock to string in readiness. I was fleeter of foot than the Habiru giant and quickly narrowed the gap between us. When the soldiers came, I wanted to be ready.

There was fighting going on at the villa. Armed servants were putting up a fight with such weapons as they possessed,

but it was an unfair contest. Paid soldiers who live by their arms are so far superior to untrained men in battle that it is as if men fought with boys. I could see one after another cut down to bleed out their lives in the gardens surrounding the square white villa which was the home of Ganthod. A smaller house—intuitively I knew this to be the house of Samson—was already on fire.

Samson was almost at the villa wall gate. Two men with metal caps on their heads and spears in their hands ran at him. The big Habiru lifted a rock, threw it. It took one of the men in the forehead and dropped him. Samson closed with the other, avoiding his thrusting spear, yanking it from his fingers and snapping it in half. Lifting the man by his hair, he ran the broken spearhead into his belly and dropped him.

Someone slammed the gates to keep him out while they killed the people inside. Samson roared in anger and put his hands on the wooden gates. I saw his palms slip where he could gain no handhold. Then he squatted down and gripping the bottoms of each door, heaved upward.

For a moment nothing moved, the Habiru giant standing on straddled, bent legs and with bowed back, the wooden gates secure in their hinges. Then, slowly, the doors began to give. I saw the hinges come out of the masonry, the plankings start to buckle. Explosively, the wood gave way. The two sides of the gate flew in different directions as Samson straightened.

Still shouting, he ran into the yard.

I came up to the gaping gateway and lifted my bow. From here I commanded a perfect view of the gardens and the front of the villa. I saw men in leather armor, metal caps on their heads, turn to oppose Samson. My bow came up. I fired.

A Philistine went down with my shaft in his chest.

The bow is not a weapon popular in Philistia or in Judah, where men depend more on swords and spears. Ulysses had convinced me of its reaching power, however; now I was glad for having studied him. My quiver I pulled around in front of me and as fast as I could put arrow to bowstring I shot. As each shaft fled away, I saw it bury itself to the fletching in a man's chest or middle.

Samson had picked up a length of broken planking. He used it as a reaper does a scythe, moving it from side to side, breaking heads and arms and legs with the might of his swing. Men screamed when that massive timber drove into them. He maimed many men that afternoon but whether he could have avoided being taken prisoner or even death itself without my

help, I do not know. I shot my arrows, picking my victims when I saw him most in danger. Perhaps this was why my destiny sent me into Judah to seek him out. It was not yet time for Samson to die.

Twice men came for me, but my arrows were many and they died in midstep, falling to the ground and rolling, though one or two collapsed and never moved again. Death comes in strange ways to men, and the manner in which they receive it tells me something of what they had been. Those who flopped longest, shredding at the arrow with their fingers, most loved life, those who fell unmoving were tired or bitter at its buffets; or so I believed.

Now a man on a horse galloped around the corner of the building and I recognized Jubaal. His nose was mashed flat upon his cheeks and the nose-piece of his helmet stood out where his nose should have been. I called to him and when he reined in and turned, I sent an arrow arching.

It was my only miss of the day.

Seconds before I fired, Samson had thrown his timber at him. It caught Jubaal, drove him from the saddle into the arms of his men. I dropped my bow and ran forward with the sword of Gilgamesh in my hand. I shouted to Jubaal to stand up, to meet me face to face. I felt I owed him something for having called Delilah a harlot.

His men set him on his feet. He had not been too badly hurt by the timber Samson had flung at him. The wind was knocked from his lungs but no ribs had been broken because it had been a sidelong blow, strong enough to bowl him from the back of his horse but no more.

Our shields clanged as we came together and our swords scratched sparks. His face was a study in baffled rage and hate. Between his clenched teeth he rasped oaths at me.

"Trojan traitor! Baal-damned rogue!"

He should have saved his breath for fighting Jubaal had the repute of being a good swordsman but this day he was so blind with anger he was like a child in a tantrum. My blade dented his helmet, hacked a gobbet from his shield and sent him reeling.

His men sprang between us but I lashed out at full length with my sword even as he was pulled away. I felt the jar of contact. Jubaal screamed. His right hand—the hand that held his sword—leaped from his arm as my edge severed it. Hand and sword fell to the ground together.

Men drove between us so that I had to turn my shield

against them while others carried Jubaal off. For a few seconds it was warm work there, for I faced half a dozen men at once. I fought as once I had fought against Achilles and Ajax when the tide of battle had flung us together in a little knot on the sands of Ilion, blindly and without reason, only with instinct and the need to stay alive.

Then a shadow touched me and Samson was at my side. He held an iron rod in his hands. I think farmers use such a rod for turning the stone with which they pulp olives to make oil. At any rate it was never intended to break bones and mash flesh to bloody pulp as Samson did with it. Men fell before him as chaff before the reaper. I cut a few down but it was Samson with his long iron pole who put fear in their faces and drove them before us.

He rested a moment, leaning on the thick metal stick, all black and covered with red blood and bits of flesh and hair, tears running down his cheeks. When I looked at him in surprise, he only shook his head and I understood then that he was grieving for his dead wife.

The villa buildings were flaming fiercely, the sound of the leaping fire-tongues like a low roaring in the ears. Beyond them we could see the Philistines fleeing, running up the hillside and over its crown, carrying the crippled Jubaal with them.

Samson dropped his rod and moved toward the burning villa. He seemed in a daze so that I ran to him and caught his arm, trying to stop him. As might a soldier shake loose a babe, so he did to me.

"Asherbath is in there. I must get her out."

"It's madness. The place is a solid flame."

He walked on through the blazing doorway. I saw sparks come to life in his long black hair, in his beard. I whispered to Cybele to guide me, then went after him. Bending my head I rammed through that fiery gateway into the entrance chamber of the house. The fire was not so intense in here, the Philistines apparently having fired first the walls.

There was a niche with a statue of Dagon in one of the walls and since the wall was on fire, through a trick in the wind currents it seemed the bull god was breathing out smoke and flame. He seemed to be laughing with a frenzied mirth that made me shudder. Perhaps he laughs at what fools men are, I thought, and went after Samson.

I trailed him into the inner court, open to the sky. The fire had not yet touched this section of the house. A manservant

lay beside a little fishpond, his chest a bloody froth. A fallen bronze dagger lay close to his rigidly extended fingers A pretty girl—a slave or like the man, a servant—was crumpled over a wooden bench, her torn garment lying about her middle. Wide, glassy eyes stared at me. Someone had tied her hands behind her back and there were black and blue marks on her thighs when hard hands had held her helpless for the raping. Her neck had been broken and lay on her shoulder at an odd angle.

I cursed these Philistines.

Samson gave a great cry from somewhere near at hand. I ran to find him, stumbling over broken necklaces of gold beads, jeweled pins, a golden disc to Shamash which bore the sunburst emblem, a shattered vase of Achaean workmanship. Bits of treasure hastily dropped by the looting soldiers when Samson and I attacked them, and before the others had fired the walls.

The heat was awesome, now. It was like being inside a furnace. I opened my mouth to breathe as I ran from room to room.

I found them in a little bedchamber which opened off the central court. The man was kneeling beside the low bedstead, his face buried in its cushions, hands clasped. He was groaning, writhing, twisting himself against the couch.

"Yahweh! Yahweh! Give her back to me. Give her life—forgive my sin against you! Yahweh—hear me."

I caught his shoulder, shook him. He lifted his tear-stained face to me and I could see agony etching hard lines in it. "It was my fault. She was a light, thoughtless little thing. She loved life so much. If I hadn't gone to Ashkelon—stolen those thirty chitons in plain view of everybody—this wouldn't have happened."

"You can't blame yourself," I grated harshly. "And you can't kill yourself for a dead woman no matter how much you loved her."

She lay outstretched on the bed, a tiny smile curving the corners of her full red mouth. At least she had not been afraid to die. The fingers of her right hand, heavily ringed, were still clinging to the hilt of the tiny dagger she had driven into her chest just between her breasts. She was dressed as if for a holiday, with a thin byssus tunic and a golden necklet, many golden bracelets and anklets. Her black hair was done up in a high coiffure and hung with pretty baubles. Her skin was pale ivory. Alive, she must have been very lovely.

"Come on, come on," I shouted.

"Go alone. I stay here with her."

"Fool! What good can your dying do her?"

"I'll always stay with her. I loved her."

The room was filling with smoke. The floor was hot underfoot. In a few minutes the room would puff up in a burst of flame. I'd seen it happen in Ilion the night the Greeks took the city. I glanced around me. I could never overcome Samson by pure strength. I had to hit him, knock him senseless.

I drew my dagger. It had a broad metal pommel that, reversed, made a copper wedge against my hand. When I struck with that, not even Samson would stay awake. Or so I hoped.

I tried reason one last time, being no man to strike a comrade even when it was for his own good. "Samson, listen. You can do more for her alive than dead. Take her hence, if you want. Bury her. Raise over her a mighty tombstone so that all men will know your love. Sacrifice to her—with Philistine lives."

"No," he breathed. "I sacrifice only to Yahweh, and then not with human life. But this other idea—this tomb. Yes, I can raise a mighty monument to Asherbath, the fame of which will last forever."

He got to his feet. His black hair and beard singed with sparks, the giant bent and lifted the woman in his arms as if she were no more than a cloth-and-wool doll such as those with which Philistine children play. I whirled, ran to the door, dragged the thick brocade curtain from its rings and carried it to the fishpond.

I soaked the curtain until I staggered beneath its weight, then ran to throw it over Samson and the dead girl in his arms. My own cloak I wetted down, then wrapped it around my head and shoulders, leaving only enough space to breathe.

"Follow me, Samson—and run," I called to him.

Lowering my head, I leaped into those red, dancing fire-flames. I ran slightly, swiftly; I had no mind to give my body to Vesta, who is the goddess of fire, before my time. I remembered vaguely where the doorway was and angled my feet toward it.

The flames were all about me, like a living thing. They moaned, they whispered, they laughed in an endless instant of heat and terror. I admit to my fear. No man likes to think himself about to be burned alive.

Then I was out in the sweet open air.

Hands tugged at my mantle, yanked it flaming from me. Mahthys let her eyes run over me from my helmeted head to my sandaled toes. I saw relief gather behind her wet black lashes. The mantle was on the ground, burning fiercely. A shudder touched me. If it had not been for that, I might have blazed as brightly.

"Samson," I whispered, and turned.

I saw a burning thing move out of the fire, walking slowly. I muffled a curse and put out my hands, knowing Mahthys' strength would not be enough to remove the heavy brocade drape. Fire touched my hands, burned them; I ignored the pain to wrestle the blazing cover off the big Habiru and throw it to the ground.

Miraculously, even the thin byssus tunic of the dead Asherbath was untouched. Samson was unhurt, alive and well.

Mahthys came up against me and together we watched as he put down the girl, then hunted about until he found a spade. He dug her grave himself, waving me off with a hand. He was a lonely figure, bent over the digging, huge and somehow elemental, as if there were forces in him no other man could know.

Mahthys shook me with a hand. "There are other buildings that haven't been fired," she whispered, eyes bright. "We ought to be able to find food in them, maybe an animal or two we could ride, in the adjoining stables. And in the smaller house—the fire wasn't set well there and died out when I threw water on the timbers—we might find clothes, even money."

She was a sensible little thing. While I grieved for the lost Asherbath and the love Samson had for her, my Egyptian girl considered only the problems of the living. Food, money, clothing. The words made a good sound in my ears. Besides, I thought that Samson might like to be alone with his grief.

"Show me," I told her.

The smaller house was set perhaps two hundred yards beyond the large villa. Some of its timbers were charred and wet where Mahthys had been at work with a waterbucket, but mostly the building was untouched. Its bell-shaped facade was painted blue and red and was very gay. Mahthys put her hand in mine, urging me to run.

A row of huge earthenware jars, with ladders leading up to their sealed caps, stood along one house wall. They were used to hold the grain and oil which was so much a part of the lives of these people of Philistia and Canaan. A score of yards

away I saw an open-air temple, a roof supported by painted wooden pillars with a statue of Ashtaroth standing on a black pedestal. Asherbath would have worshiped the love goddess, I thought, remembering her good looks and the air of sensuality which even her dead body had exuded. A row of trees neatly planted gave the little temple the appearance of being in a forest. I wondered if Samson had ever made love to her before that statue of an evening when the stars looked down on him. Or perhaps it was here she took her lovers.

Mahthys exclaimed softly, standing in the doorway.

The interior was untouched except for an overturned vase and a broken statue on the antechamber floor, and these might have been left by Asherbath and her retinue fleeing the little house for shelter in the villa at the first attack. Perhaps Jubaal had ordered his men to attack the villa first, since that was where the defense was made.

"Look, Kharnos," my little Egyptian said, kneeling before a great blue chest with a bronze handle, lifting out a copper headdress. She placed it on her thick black hair. It was a magnificent ornament, of bright red enamel against which the burnished copper glittered, and it made her look like a different woman.

Her hand tore the woolen tunic from her shoulders. She stood, bending forward to step out of it so that her ripe breasts swung a moment, heavy and firm with protuberant brown nipples. I caught my breath at sight of her nakedness. In just that copper ornament, she was almost as Delilah had been on my last night in Ashkelon.

She heard my gasp, glanced at me shyly.

"I'm not a slavegirl any more, am I?" she whispered, standing straight so that I could inspect her lovely body, proud of the hunger she had aroused in me. Her head lowered as she looked down at her nakedness.

"I should wash," she murmured.

"Wash? Are you mad? The people in Tinnath will see the flames and smoke—" My words fell away as understanding came to me.

They had known about this attack in Tinnath. It explained why no merchant would speak with Samson, offer no explanation for Ganithod's absence from his usual post in the market place. Tinnath had known, probably had been warned to ignore what would happen.

No, there was no hurry. No one would come for several

days, at least. I saw Mahthys bent above the chest, yanking out more ornaments and colored linens so sheer they were transparent. A frown of concentration was on her pretty face, drawing her thin brows together.

Then she was whirling, racing off into some unknown corner of the house, long legs flashing. Laughter trailed over her smoothly fleshed back at me.

I thought of the life she represented, here in this place of the dead. Life had no place for death in its thinking, and Mahthys and I were vibrantly alive. Perhaps it was my Trojan blood that made me philosophical; we men of Ilion are more Greek than anything else, since the Cretans who had founded our city were of the old Achaean blood. Life and death! As Uranus governs the one, so Mars does the other and Orpheus had learned to his cost that they can never be intermingled.

I went and sat upon a wooden bench placed close to a wall covered with a painting of the god Baal being resurrected, and leaned my head back against its wooden panels. I was tired. My muscles ached and there was the stink of scorched flesh in my nostrils. It seemed I had been killing forever. First Arphad, then the Philistines. I was sick of slaying but it had put a fever in my blood.

My eyes closed. For a little time, I think I slept.

I woke to the touch of soft hands across my chest. In the dusk I saw Delilah before me, naked under something that shimmered with many colors like a rainbow mist, a copper diadem on her black hair and golden bracelets on her ivory arms. Rings gleamed on her fingers, many rings so that it seemed her fingers were made of metal. Through cunning slits in the byssus I saw her breasts pushed outward naked, with their nipples gilded. A belt of carbuncles, cunningly caught in gold wires, held her slim waist.

"Delilah," I whispered. "Delilah . . ."

Soft laughter teased my ears. The hands moved downward and now I realized in my half waking state that those hands were removing my armor, my chiton, taking away the cotton cloth at my loins, rendering me naked in her eyes.

Her hands stroked my body gently, slowly. My flesh was alive, though my mind still slumbered. An oil boat had been lighted off to one side. It cast red tints across my skin. I sat like a god with my back to the painting of Baal as this woman, this high priestess of Ashtaroth, ministered to my pleasure.

The blood pounded in my veins as does a river in its narrow banks at the season of flood. The twilight air was cool but I

was hot with desire and my hands went out to gather her breasts in my palms. She hissed in her throat at my caress and quivered.

"Kharnos," she breathed.

She had come back to me in life as she had in my dreams. I asked no question of the gods. I accepted what they gave. I drew her up against me, feeling the bite of the carbuncles at my middle and the pressure of her breasts on my chest. I sank into the perfumed wonder of her open mouth, losing myself in our kiss.

My hands adored her flesh under the colored linen. I bent to kiss her throat, the tips of her breasts. I drew her across my lap, tore the byssus away and lifting her under the armpits, moved my lips this way and that upon her body.

She moaned with pleasure.

She grew demanding, crying out for me to take her, to make myself one with her body. Her hands, her mouth, came silently to urge me to her command. She was moaning, shaking fitfully. I resisted as long as I was able in order to prolong this timeless ecstasy, but she was like a living goddess with the power to order men to her whims. I was forced to obey her, to do as she wished.

Our enjoyment went on and on.

Much later I went alone to seek out Samson, leaving Mahthys sleeping in the great bed which once had belonged to Asherbath. Sometime during the night I discovered it was not Delilah who groaned in the delirium of love, but Mahthys. It was a slow merging of identities, as if Delilah indeed had been with me but had turned into Mahthys when the delight of our union had been too much to bear. It was as if Ashteroth had chosen at that moment to rip away the veil which blinded my eyes.

It made no difference to me.

Delilah, or Mahthys, one woman is much like another when the grip of the love goddess is upon a man. What matter if high priestess or slavegirl receives the sacrifice? The vessel is incidental; it is the act of adoration that is pleasing to the goddess.

Or so I reflected as I wandered through the dawn mists to find the big Habiru. Life was a river which flowed on endlessly, leaving the dead behind it like debris tossed ashore when they had served their purpose. Mahthys and I were chips still floating on that endless river with our destiny yet to be

fulfilled. Nor could we see ahead into the misted future into which the river rolled, nor sense the fate that waited us. All we knew was the past and the momentary instant of the present.

For the living, the present was to be enjoyed.

Was this why I had mistaken Mahthys for Delilah? Could there be a reason why she and I must be bound together, like an offering tied with withes and thrown into the sacrificial flames? Must we be as one in order that our destiny would be fulfilled? I did not know. I could only guess.

Samson lay sleeping on the grave where he had buried his dead wife. He had covered it with a great slab of stone on which he set two tiny golden objects. When I came nearer I saw that they were the urn earrings Mahthys had purchased in Tinnath to be his gift to Asherbath.

FIVE

The horned altars on the high places

Samson thrust a blazing torch against the timbers of the house that had been his villa home outside Tinnath as Mahthys and I stood watching. His face was grim and streaked with dried tears. There was dirt on his face and on his hands for he had slept out the night on the ground beside the grave while Mahthys and I had revelled in his bed.

Mahthys made a little noise in her throat as the flames caught and grew. It hurt her common sense to see such a waste of wealth. Piled in the bedroom were the gifts Samson had given his dead wife, clothes and jewels and furniture. Only these had he denied to Mahthys, taking them gently from her hands when she would have put them in the blue chest which I told her she could take away with her.

"Take only the things I did not give," he had said, with a sadness in his voice. "My gifts shall perish in the fire."

The blue chest was bound on the back of the little ass. It contained many fine garments and nearly all the ornaments which had belonged to Asherbath. As a woman, my little Egyptian coveted them, for she knew well enough how they complemented her beauty; there was no nonsense about these being objects that had belonged to a dead woman.

"They belonged to the Philistine soldiers who killed her," she said with that feminine logic which bends at times to suit

itself. "You drove off the soldiers. Now it is your loot by right of conquest."

Samson wanted her to have them. As he pointed out, if they were left behind the people from Timnath would help themselves to the baubles which the fire spared, and this he did not want to happen. So the blue chest rested where she could reach out a hand and stroke it from the back of the white mare she straddled. We had found the animals unharmed in the stables. I selected a big bay animal for myself, the smaller white one for the girl. Samson scorned horses. He was used to his own two feet, he said, not the four hoofs of a horse.

We were going north to Zorah.

It had been decided over a breakfast of cheese and figs and sweet milk that morning, outside in the open air, since the Habiru refused to eat inside the house which had been his. I had nowhere else to go, certainly not back to Ashkelon where Shepthazzah and his son would put me to a painful death. Mahthys went wherever I chose, of course; she left the decision to me.

"Why not travel to Zorah?" I asked her. "We have to begin a new life, since both of us are free. In Judah I may find employment as a soldier, as weaponry is the only life I know."

"You'll make a good captain," Samson nodded, adding that he was a Judge in his land, which was a position of some importance, I was to understand. The Habiru had no kings as did other nations; they were ruled by their great men or chieftains in times of strife.

In more peaceful periods, when prosperity lay upon their people, their society was akin to the Greek idea of amphictony, which was a system of obedience to a religious hierarchy. Their high priest was an adviser, possessing no political authority but only a kind of reverent deference. These Habiru were a nomad people whose unit was the tribe; there were twelve tribes which constituted the nation, and each tribe had its elders. Samson was of the tribe of Dan, which lived in the triangle of land between Ashdod and Joppa on the coast and inland beyond the Valley of Sorek almost to Jerusalem.

The fire was well started by this time. Samson watched it, head thrown back and eyes unblinking, a monumental figure hewed as if from something other than mere flesh and blood. Having known him for a little while I could understand the superstitious awe of the Philistines. In Ilion we had a saying that no man dies until the goddess forgets his name. No matter how often the Philistine tried, they would never slay him until

his Yahweh could not remember who he was. Or perhaps Yahweh did things differently in His lands than had Cybele in hers.

He walked toward us, head bent so that his black beard lay against his chest. I said no word to him, respecting his grief. My hand lifted the reins of my big bay, my toes kicked it to a walk. Mahthys followed me, holding in her hand a rope tied to the ass's bridle.

We could smell burning wood and hear the beating of the flames. Occasionally a spark fell to the ground close by. This startled the horses, who danced in their fright. I turned once and stared behind me at the ruin of what had been a prosperous villa farm and thought of burning Troy.

Some men are marked to walk amid death and destruction. I felt then that I was such a one.

We bypassed Tinnath, seeing it from its bordering hills as a toy town in the sunlight, its walls and buildings of white clay mixed with red bricks, colored tiles forming its rooftops. Samson never turned his head, but his shoulders squared so I knew the town was in his mind.

I let him set the pace. The horses were fresh, eager for running, but since he refused to mount, we could do no more than follow where he led. We saw not the lions of this land, which are slightly smaller than their African cousins and not so thick in the mane. I kept my eye alert for them because of the horses, on the flesh of which these big cats like to dine.

After a time Mahthys lost her gravity of spirit and began to prattle like a magpie. She wondered what it would be like to dwell in Israel; she had lived in Egypt during her childhood and then in Knossos on Crete, and for a little while in Ashkelon. Israel would be a new experience for her and she was avid for it.

"Are you homesick for On?" I asked after a while. I knew a dull sadness ate in me at times for Ilion. I would have given much to stand on the great wall and look westward toward the waters of the Thessalian Sea.

She considered this, head tilted, swaying gently to the movement of her mount. "Not really. I was a child then. I can remember a few things, the sundial in the garden, the sun-wagon which was drawn through the streets during the *ahkit* of the year, which is the springtime of Egypt, when the Nile waters make fertile the lands around it. And once I saw the Pharaoh in a chariot while standing on my nurse's shoulder. Rameses, I think his name was.

"There was a reed lattice between the garden and the outer chamber of the house. There was a wooden door bound in brass, I remember, and in the gardens a fountain with the sundial. I used to fall asleep listening to its waters. Father wanted me to dedicate my life to the Temple of Ra, to become a priestess. For a while after I became a slave I used to wish I'd done what he asked. They would never have sold me then. Now I'm glad I did not."

She recalled a trip on the Nile in one of the skiffs made of long bundles of papyrus bound together; from its deck she had stared at the wonders of mighty Memphis, and had seen the giant temples which are dwarfed by the cliffs below Thebes.

Mahthys sighed. "I've forgotten so much, so much. I was twelve when I was sold into slavery, to Phalas of Knossos. I began a new life, I wore different clothes—no more thin linen tunic but a dress with a wasp waist and bell skirt holding many flounces. And—my breasts were bare." She glanced at me, smiling faintly. "It was the custom in Crete, you know. It still is. I was quite proud of my bosom, I remember. Phales had a brother who often commented on it."

I grunted and she laughed merrily, thinking me jealous and being pleased by it. Women are all the same, be they Trojan, Cretan, Libyan or Egyptian. They delight in being thought much of and in being able to rouse a man to jealousy. Maybe we men make them that way by our attentions, but it is a universal thing, beyond habit and custom.

Crete had seemed very cosmopolitan to her, especially at first. There were any number of sights to be seen in Knossos, not the least of which were the many sorts of men who frequented its wharfside streets. Minyans and Achaeans, Trojans and Hittites, blond men with blue eyes who looked a bit like the Mycenaeans but who came from a land to the far north where precious amber may be found, smaller Scythians from the plains beyond Thrace, came flocking there. She went to see the bull dancers; once she had been made ill by seeing a slim girl gored and tossed. It was an old custom, this Cretan bull dancing, and one which was only now slowly fading out.

The sea city was not the Knossos it had been a thousand years before fire and the great earthquake gutted its massive red walls and blue pillars. Then the Cretan ships had ruled the world. Even mighty Pharaoh gave it a wide berth when he sent his chariots and his Nubian infantry out to conquer. There were no sailors to compare with the Cretans. The sea seemed

born into their blood; because they worshipped Poseidon, some said. The wooden hulls of their warships were all the walls Knossos needed, they were accustomed to say.

Samson held up his hand. I reined in and looked at him, recalled from my dreams of ancient glory to this sunbaked arid land of lower Israel. He gestured toward a distant hilltop where a thin plume of dark smoke eddied skyward.

"The Philistines make sacrifice," he growled.

I waited. After a time he flexed his muscles and said, "Go you along the road. I have business where that altar is."

"Road? What road?" I asked.

There was only a pebbled wilderness around us. Samson might know his way back and forth between Tinnath and Zorah but I was a stranger to the land of Judah. He grumbled in his beard, angry at being chained by our companionship, I am sure. But when Mahthys slipped from her horse and began unfastening the basket that held the barley cakes and cheese, he put on a slightly better face.

We ate in the shade of a sycamore tree, seated on flat stones. We would be traveling another fulll day and part of a third, Samson told us, staring toward the black smoke hanging like a feather against the clear blue sky. I could see eagerness in him like that in a hound before the hunting. His great hands were itching to lay themselves on Philistine flesh.

"We could follow you," I told him. "Go where the smoke calls and forget about us."

He frowned, torn between desire and friendship. I reminded him I was no child who could not be trusted out of his sight and he looked shamefaced. After a while he stood up and nodded without speaking. He set off straight as a bird might fly toward that distant smoke plume.

I watched his bearskin ripple in the faint breeze, then stretched out against the treebole, watching Mahthys gather together what was left of our meal and put it in the basket. The sun was warm on my skin and made me drowsy. My eyelids closed.

When I woke the sun was lower in the sky. Mahthys had crept under my arm and was asleep. Across the valley I thought to make out the striding figure of Samson but it was so far away he was no bigger than a dot, so I could have been mistaken.

My fingers tickled her to wakefulness. First she wriggled, then she writhed, finally she opened her eyes sleepily and

muttered something unintelligible. I kissed the tip of her nose; she smiled; I pinched her buttock; she giggled. Then she leaned forward, bit me gently and told me that if I intended making love to her, to go ahead and do it. Otherwise she was going to get up and find Samson.

"I worry about him," she said lightly, to hide her honest concern. "He acts as if nothing could ever harm him. A certain amount of confidence is good in a man but he overdoes it."

I could see she was more interested in Samson than in lovemaking so I slapped her rump and pushed her away with a promise that when the stars came out I would be waiting for her to come to my blanket. She nodded absentmindedly and went on telling me that Yahweh was all right as a god, but if a man overtaxed his deity, sometimes the god struck back at him.

"In that respect a god is like a parent," she explained gravely as I helped her mount the white mare. "A parent loves his child but to be constantly annoyed by him overtaxes his patience."

"Yes, wise Mahthys," I replied.

"Oh, you. Just because you've never been a father." Then she asked more sharply, "You haven't, have you?"

"Not yet," I said with meaning and laughed as she flushed.

She rode down the hillside before me and I cantered after her, lazily pleased with myself and the world, with Mahthys and her bright ways. The air was cool and sweet to my lungs which had known the dust of slavery for so long. The weight of my sword at my hip was pleasing to a warrior who had been weaponless for three years. And the taste of womanflesh was like a rich wine to my senses who had known no sensual joys for so long.

I came up with her in a little while and we rode in silence through the afternoon sunlight. I must have slept longer than I thought, for I saw no sign of the big Habiru and in a short hour or two a man can walk only so far. Twice I drew rein and scanned the land about us. Worriment grew in me.

The ground was sloping upward now, and we could see flowering almond trees heavy with their blossoms, and a few scrub oaks that lay like a fringe about these barren hilltops like hair below the bald pate of an old man. Perhaps Samson was in under those tree-branches; at any rate, he had been heading toward the hilltop where the black smoke was ascending. I swung my bay in that direction and rode with

Mahthys close beside me upward and in among the trees. It was cool and dim here, and reminded me vaguely of the forests of Troad.

I heard a scream as if from far off.

Mahthys pushed closer against me so that she rode with her knee rubbing into mine. She had found and appropriated a fine chlamys of blue wool in the house of Asherbath, which she wore over a short chiton. Since she rode astraddle her horse, her legs were bared to the thigh except for sandals on her feet.

"This is a bad place, Kharnos," she whispered. "A place of death and spilled blood and evil deeds. I can sense it."

"Pah, you're tired. Fall back and let me go alone."

But she would not, insisting that she ride with me, asking only that I give her my big dagger. This she placed in her belt, twisting it so that the haft was caught and held close to her hand.

We came to a little break in the trees and saw ahead of us a horned altar of stone where something burned, making a pall of smoke. Again we heard that eerie scream only now it was closer at hand; there was an imperiousness to it that made the hackles rise on the nape of my neck; I had heard a cry like that long ago in Ilion when food was running short and despair walked the city streets like a phantom, spreading panic. Then the call had been uttered by a Corybante, one of those priestesses of the goddess Cybele whose privilege it was to serve the Mater Phrygia in the taurobolium, the feast of blood.

I remembered the religious frenzies of those Corybantes in Troy, and the priests called *galli*, and fear came into my heart. I wanted no stone knife at my manhood, freeing me of its burden, which was an act sacred to the goddess. I reached for the reins of the white mare, intending to turn and ride back under the trees.

Even as my fingers wrapped around the leather plaits, something hit my shoulders a great blow, toppling me from the blanket-saddle. I heard Mahthys scream, also heard her cry choked off. I hit the ground and rolled, knowing as my hands closed on his wrist that a man had leaped on me from an overhanging treebranch.

Over and over we thrashed, rolling through thickets and crashing into treeboles. I lost my hold on his dagger-wrist, felt the slash of a knifeblade at my skin, regained my hold and bending his arm far back, heard it snap as it broke. The

man screamed but I closed my ears to the appeal in his voice. I snatched up his fallen dagger and drove it toward his belly.

Many hands caught me then. Smooth womanflesh pressed into me. Loose hair whipped against my eyes, blinding me. I felt a breast touch my cheek and fall away, winced as sharp teeth closed on my wrist. Four women were fighting me: Corybantes wearing tiny yellow aprons at their loins, yellow being the color of the sun and holy to Cybele. They were naked otherwise. They were lean women, fierce of eye and strong.

"Rash man, fight not against your fate."

"It is a holy thing to be demanned by the goddess."

"We shall not kill you. Not kill you!"

More than women fought me now, bearing me off my feet and down among the bushes where I threshed for a little while, then lay still, my throat caught in a length of plaited leather, choking off the air. My muscles strutted as I lay there quivering, alive to my danger and waiting only for the chance to fight again.

My head felt swollen as if it would burst. In a red mist I saw Mahthys dragged forward, her cloak and chiton yanked away, heard the howls of the naked *galli* ringing in my ears as they capered about the shivering girl. Mahthys they would rape and worse, me they would make into a eunuch and burn those parts of me they severed. It was not a nice religion, this worship of Cybele, who was called Thea, Ma and Opa in other tongues. On the high hilltops, at the horned altars, the goddess had first been worshipped two thousand years ago and more, for the first men believed that only with blood and sacrifice, pain and lust, was her sacred anger assuaged.

Cruel fingers held me down so that I might witness the ruthless taking of my companion by the priests. A woman crooned in my ear, complimenting my size and strength, telling me that if I chose to be a priest of Cybele she would intercede for me. Savagely I shook my head and when the leather thong loosened slightly, strove to come again to my feet.

I almost made it. I shed priestesses and priests as a dog does water after a wetting, but they were too many for me. All I did was delay the raping of Mahthys for those priests clustered about her had to come and lend their strength so that I might be overborne.

As I hit the ground a second time, I heard a voice bellow in anger. There was a rush of feet. I saw a chain swing

through the air, heard it hit flesh and break bones. A man screamed and another sobbed. The weight of hands went away from me.

Panting, I crouched and watched Samson striding forward like the Colossus which straddled the harbor of Rhodes. A great chain was in his hands; he swung it like a flail, back and forth; it took the Corybantes and *galli* off their feet as a scythe cuts down the grain when ripe.

"Foul abominations! Offal of the earth!"

They tried to fight but they were no match for his immense strength. I saw a priestess rushing at him with a dagger, saw the chain whip across her breasts, heard her scream and watched her fall to the ground and hurl herself about as if by doing so she might ease the agony of her flesh. A priest went down with both legs broken, another had his head half torn from his trunk when the bloody links took him across his throat. Samson was a madman with the hate alive in him like a fire burning. He walked back and forth beating at their fallen bodies and when he dropped the chain there were no priests nor priestesses left alive.

He lifted me with a hand, his face expressionless. Neither surprise nor reproach for my having followed him on what he considered a private quest showed on his features; but I detected an amusement in his dark eyes, an understanding of the spirit of companionship which had prompted me to seek him out. He was a lonely man, unused to friendship, used only to going and coming by himself, during the years when he had absented himself from Zorah to seek out and lie with foreign women.

Mahthys was putting herself to rights beside the horned altar. Her face was flushed, not from embarrassment but with anger. One by one she went to the fallen *galli* and retrieved her ornaments, making do with a copper pin here and there to mend the tears in her chiton.

Samson walked toward a huge boulder half buried in the soft loam. He hunkered down, wriggling his thick fingers into the dirt beneath it. He waited until his hands firmed solidly against the stone, then heaved. His muscles stood up in mighty ridges along his arms and across his back, at calf and thigh and neck. He gave a little grunt, relaxed, then heaved again.

I saw the boulder stir and felt awe touch me.

A dozen men might have tried to lift that rock and not have been ashamed to fail. Here the giant Habiru was at-

tempting it on his own. Mahthys glanced at me, wondering that I did not offer aid, but I shook my head; this was something which Samson must do alone.

The altar was a rectangle of stones held together by crude clay. Roughly three feet high, it was a little less than two feet square. At its four corners rocks shaped like curving horns in honor of the bull-god had been set in place. These stone altars were everywhere, attesting to the fact that men have been a long time in these lands. I had seen them on Mount Ida in Troad and in Bithynia. Always they are to be found in all the high places, for the sky has long been thought to be the abode of the gods. Burnt offerings are placed on them for the most part, though sometimes a sheep or even a child is offered to the stone knife. They were unclean places, an air of lurking evil surrounded them.

Samson was grunting steadily now. He was rising, using his bent legs to lever him upwards as his long, heavy arms held the boulder. Upwards it came, free of the ground an inch, two inches. He paused a moment, taking breath, then gave a bellowing cry and lifted. The stone rose up above his head. His hands moved, securing better grips.

He walked with it toward the altar. Sweat ran down his face and dripped from his black beard. Every muscle in his massive body was corded in strain. When he stood a foot from the stone altar he thrust the boulder from him so that it seemed to hang an instant in the air.

It fell full upon the altar. Stones cracked open, clay flew in every direction, rock dust muddied the air as that titanic weight landed on the horns. As if it were no more than a thing built of papyrus, the altar collapsed. Where it had been was now only the huge rock.

Samson nodded. "The Philistines will find it, soon enough. There are more priests and priestesses of this cult in Ashdod and Gaza. They come here and to other high altars to make their sacrifice. They will know from the size of the stone who did this."

He began to walk away, then hesitated and turned back. He looked faintly embarrassed. "Come, we've wasted enough time. We'd better get going if we want to reach Zorah before another nightfall."

I went to find the horses.

2.

Our journey took us close to the river Surr that was a tributary of the Rubin. To our right stretched the mountains of Judah. When the sun was still high in the sky we could see it reflected from distant rooftops which showed us where the town of Eshtaol lay. This was home country to Samson; he walked with a springier stride and even, at times, broke into snatches of song.

It was dark when we came to the walls of Zorah. Torches were fixed above the wooden gate and I saw men with metal caps on their heads, leaning on spears. At sight of Samson they straightened and waved their arms, calling down to him in his own tongue, a harsh mixture of gutturals which I could make nothing of, and which for me, at least, emphasized the difference between my friend and his own people.

Samson went into the cities of Philistia as if he belonged there. He knew their ways, spoke their language. The other Habirus stayed home, where they felt they belonged. They did not mix with foreigners as Samson did, but were content with their farmland furrows, with the four walls of their houses and towns.

The guards gave us hard glances as Mahthys and I rode in after Samson. My crested helmet gave them a start and they looked at my silvered cuirass with something like greed in their eyes. Our horses came in for that silent inspection too, horses being a rare commodity in Israel these days, owned only by the rich men of the tribes. Perhaps they heard the clink of golden ornaments in the blue chest on the ass that plodded after us, for their looks changed a little. It was as if they said, At least we won't have to support these foreigners, they've had the decency to bring along the necessities. In the shadow of my nose-piece, I grinned in understanding.

We came to a big white house set back a little from the town square and surrounded by fig trees that was the home of Manoah, the father of Samson. A woman in a white woolen tunic with a fringed shawl gathered about her head like a hood opened the door to his knock and hearty shout. He caught her up, hugged and kissed her, then introduced her as Miriam, his old nurse and now female steward of the house.

The big Habiru went before us like a great wind, crying out greetings and making us known to one and all. My helmet was off my head and in my hands; I felt a little out of place,

being in bronze armor and with my weapons by my side, but they made nothing of it. Manoah and his wife Rachel were old people, I discovered to my surprise; later I was to learn they had had Samson when both had been close to middle age.

Mahthys went off with Rachel. I stayed to converse with Manoah. He was a learned man who could read and write, which was no mean accomplishment. He kept a terra cotta jar in his cellar filled with good wine for the travellers who came to Zorah, for when he learned strangers were in the city he sent for them to come so he might converse with them. I found him extremely knowledgeable about the world, as a result.

He knew that Troy was no more, that Menelaus and Helen had not gone back to Sparta but had journeyed on instead to Egypt where they were still staying. I was surprised to learn this, even more surprised to learn that Agamemnon, that great king of Mycenae and brother to Menelaus, had been killed with an axe by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus upon his return to Mycenae. He was one man who got little out of his attack on Ilion, I reflected.

Manoah spoke of Ulysses who had not been seen nor heard from after he sailed away from the Trojan strand. He thought surely the man was dead, though travellers from Ithaka said that his wife Penelope busied herself with her weaving and turned away all suitors, saying her husband would come back to her. Though they had been enemies, it was like old times to me. I inquired after other Trojans. Manoah told me of some gossip—a rumor only, he assured me—which spoke of Aeneas, who had been a brother in arms to me in Ilion It seems Aeneas had stolen a Greek ship with some men and sailed away in the dark of the night, with the flames of blazing Troy turning the sea red around their oars. Or so the story went.

From Troy and Greece he turned to the rest of the world. Egypt under a new Pharaoh—another Rameses—was undergoing a series of attacks from sea raiders consisting of Etruscans, Achaeans, Sardinians and others. Manoah was of the opinion that these were not pirates but entire races moving about the Mediterranean area, since they came with their wives and children and all their belongings. In the lands east of Troy—Bithynia and Phrygia—peoples from Scythia and its back country were constantly moving about, establishing

new homes, new cities. Already they had defeated the Hittite empire which had tried to oppose them.

"We are living in a period of unrest," Manoah said thoughtfully, "a time when people all over the world are on the move. Barbarians from the north, from the great lands to the east, are coming in vans and wagons and on horseback to the cultural centers, to the coastal areas. I blame it on the Philistines and the Phoenicians. Their ships go everywhere, touch every shoreline. They bring copper goods and faience beads to the forest people, arousing their cupidity for more such wealth.

"Perhaps Egypt suffers most because it is so rich. There is quick loot to be taken by men desperate for profit. They make forays in their ships—a quick raid for gold and slaves —and are gone before anyone can stop them. I suppose they'll find a place to their liking sooner or later and settle down. It always happens this way with a wandering people.

"These migrations are going on all over the world," the old man said, shaking his head. Then with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes, he added, "Just as we Habiru migrated into Canaan a little more than two hundred years ago, under Moses and then Joshua. We captured cities like Jericho and Gideon, then Jerusalem. For a time we even overcame the cities of Ashkelon and Ashdod—before the Philistines came in their ships. Even they, at that time, were immigrants, you see."

Those overseas warriors had been Achaeans, to whom both Myceneans and Trojans were as racial brothers, big men with fair hair and blue eyes for the most part. Legend says they came originally from the forest regions of a mighty continent to the north of Greece. I felt uneasy, wondering if he saw in me an old enemy.

It was enough for him that I was a friend to his son, however. He was highly pleased to learn I had fought beside him against the Philistines as Samson was quick to tell him when he came in with Miriam, bearing platters of steaming lamb and figs and juicy melons for our supper. We ate and talked and drank wine together No mention was made of my relationship with Mahthys, it being assumed that we were wed or that she was my concubine. The Habiru had become assimilated enough during their years in Canaan to look with an understanding eye upon the custom of foreigners.

When we were fat with food, Samson brought a lyre made of ebony and ivory with silver bands about its grips and

placed it before Mahthys. She gave a cry of delight and stretched out her hands to it. Her fingertips rippled over the strings which came alive to them. Sound washed over us, bathed us in sweet tones, set feet to tapping. Frowning prettily, Mahthys was trying to remember old songs, picking out a chord here and there as if to help her memory.

After a few minutes she cradled her cheek to the pillar and began to play. I leaned back, fully relaxed, feeling quite at home among friendly people. Through half closed eyes I studied the girl, the spill of black hair to her shoulders, the gentle curve of her lips as they pouted in concentration, and marveled anew at how much she looked like Delilah.

The fire in the circle of stones in the middle of the big room gave off a cradling warmth. Two red pillars supported the beamed ceiling. Between them sat Manoah in an armchair, fist supporting his seamed face, half lost in his long white beard. His eyes were closed but his head nodded to the rhythms. Samson still sat beside a small table, eating; he needed more food than ordinary men to maintain energy in his huge frame. He too kept the rhythm by tapping the edge of his knife against a clay drinking cup. Servants had come into the hall and stood in the shadows, listening.

Mahthys sang when she became more familiar with the instrument, lilting tunes which I'd never heard before, in which it seemed I could see the sparkle of sunlight on waves rushing headlong across a sea. There were more sombre songs, too, for there was a sadness in the music as if they might at one time have been funerary dirges. Once she sang a love song, translating it into the Philistine language which Samson could understand.

She laughed, flushing, when they applauded.

Samson wanted her to keep the lyre. "Nobody here can make it talk the way you do. I've had it in my room for a couple of years. Take it, keep it, I insist."

Manoah said suddenly, "As long as its strings are whole, you shall be happy, girl. Cherish it, for in a sense, it is a part of your life."

Mahthys paused between a laugh and a sob, for though she was a practical girl, the crackling fires and the dark shadows gave Manoah's words a prophetic ring. "If you say so, I'll take it. And I thank you. Every evening while we're here, I'll play and sing for you."

Her hands were clenched tight on the lyre, I saw, as if she meant to guard it with her life. Later, she had a man

make a chest of teakwood into which she could fit it so that it was spared hard knocks when we traveled.

3.

We lived in the house of Manoah for several weeks. Daily, Mahthys and I walked about the little town of Zorah studying the customs and manners of its people, learning the Habiru language.

I delighted to watch the skills of the metalmasters as they tapped with their many hammers on fine sheets of copper and gold, fashioning vases and bowls. We spent some time before the open stalls where the weavers worked in good weather, watching blankets and gaily colored shawls come to life on the looms. Since we had converted some of the Philistine jewelry stored in the blue chest into silver shekels, we were able to purchase garments for ourselves and footwear, and even a wide-brimmed sunshade hat for Mahthys.

We came to love Zorah and its people. Our mouths became accustomed to the taste of berry tarts and the juicy figs of Engeddi, to the grapes of Eschol, the wines of Carmel. Mahthys gossiped with the women who came to the well of Sarim, helping them fill the big clay amphorae which they carried on their heads and, kneeling, told little stories to their children. Together we would stand and watch the women at the tall clay cones which served as ovens where they made their flat loaves of bread, seeing them first grind the wheat on rollers then mix in the dough with long ladles. Always we bought a loaf and broke it, eating it like children, it smelled so good.

At night I played at draughts with Manoah on a gaming board wrought of silver and lapis lazuli set in red cedar. He was a sharp, skillful player and the victories between us were divided evenly. While we battled as if for gold, Mahthys learned to weave and cook stews of beans and lentils, to use spices like coriander and black cummin. Samson disappeared during the daytime hours and some nights he remained away entirely. When he did return home, he was restless as a caged animal. On those occasions I saw Manoah studying him with troubled eyes.

"He is not like other men, my son," the old man told me once, spreading his worry out for me to see. "The mark of Yahweh is strong on him, as it was on Joshua and Gideon. There is a flavor of destiny in him. He is at the same time our

champion against Philistia and our cause of dissension with them. Though to do him justice, I think the Five Cities would find another bone of contention, were he not about."

"He is your shield," I replied. "They fear him in Ashkelon."

"And in Gath, Ashdod, Jopha and Gaza."

"A man makes his own destiny."

Manoah nodded heavily and tried to banish his gloomy thoughts with a laugh and an invitation to set up the board between us for a game. I spoke to Samson, asking him when I might begin my tasks as a war captain in Israel.

"I grow rusty, doing nothing. It is a happy time for me, here in Zorah, but I feel as if I waste it."

Samson only put a big hand on my shoulder and tightened his fingers. "This is like a calm before a storm, Kharnos. Enjoy your happiness while you may. It will end soon enough, believe me." He left me wondering if the prophetic sense which Manoah enjoyed had been inherited by his son.

Mahthys was content with her life here. We shared a small bedchamber which opened off the main room, in the doorway of which was hung a leather curtain to afford us some privacy. She had decorated the bed, a low wooden affair of the kind used by the Habiru, with a woolen coverlet she had made with her own hands on the loom. It was gay with colors, and decorated with the horsehead of Ilion and the lotus blossom of Egypt. The blue chest stood against one wall, beside a cedar table she had purchased in the street of the carpenters and on which she placed a curved drinking cup called a rhython for me and a smaller one, a kylix, for herself. Between them stood a wine jar of terra cotta ware which she kept always filled with the red wine of Carmel.

We drank the wine on those nights when she felt like making love. I think she believed I was worried about the future and needed the wine to make me forget everything but her loveliness. She would disappear from the main hall early, to busy herself with nard to darken her eyes and malachite to tint their lids green, to redden her nipples and the soles of her feet with henna. There was a sexual wisdom in Mahthys which the Habiru women would call pagan, I suppose, but I must admit it heightened my appetite to see her standing in a pool of lamplight naked except for her jeweled collar and her sandals, with bracelets on her dusky arms and anklets on her legs.

Sometimes she sang naughty songs for me which she learned in Crete, playing very softly on the lyre so as not to

disturb the family. I always found her music exciting. Whether it was the words or the tunes, or merely the sight of her breasts or the curve of her naked buttocks as she bent above the lyre that roused me so much, I do not know.

There were nights when we made love for hours, when I seemed to see Delilah in her as I had in the house of Samson before we came to Zorah. It was as if she knew of my love for the Philistine woman and sought to benefit by it, stirring me to a strange, wild passion before accepting me with her body.

Never once did she mention the name to me, however, or refer to the fact that I had called her Delilah at the villa house. She seemed content to take what I had to give her, without comment. Perhaps this was because we were not married. It may be that she still considered herself a slave. All I know is that her tongue was never sharp against me, which is not the customary way of wives, at least the wives I have known in my life, who always seem glad of the chance to berate or belittle their husbands.

She grew dear to me, dearer than any woman had ever been. I loved her so much that on the few occasions when we were away from one another for any length of time I grew lonely who had never before been a lonesome man. She delighted to have me tell her this and knowing she enjoyed it, I grew into the habit. Then she would kiss me and hum to herself, and I knew that we would make love that night.

One day a traveller came to the house with news from Philistia. Jubaal was preparing an army with which to attack some enemy. No man knew what enemy this might be, but Jubaal spoke often of Samson and of a Trojan warrior who had not only broken his nose but also cut off his sword hand. By putting this and that together, even a stupid man could know Jubaal's intended quarry.

When the trader left, I went to Manoah and sat on a stool by his knees, telling him that Mahthys and I must leave, that I would not cause him trouble. If Jubaal knew that Kharnos was to be found in Zorah, it would not be well for that city when he brought his soldiers to its walls.

Manoah only smiled and shook his head. "Jubaal and his father have known for many years that Samson lives in Zorah, yet they have never attacked us. You worry too much, young man. Ashkelon probably prepares for trouble with the sea people who raid in Egypt, no more."

I was not so sure of this, nor was Samson when I told him.

He listened to me, head bent and frowning. When I was done, he nodded.

"I've heard some rumors myself," he admitted. "Nor have I been content with merely listening. I've been gathering men together in the caves of the Etam cliffs, young men who are eager to fight for Judah and with them I've put older men, men who know the use of weapons."

Anger bit in me. "What man of Judah understands the use of weapons better than I? You made me a promise, Samson."

He laughed and clapped me on the back, almost knocking me off my feet. "I have not forgotten, war captain. I've only been biding my time. Well, the time is ripe, now. When I go back to Etam, you go with me."

When I told Mahthys that night, she nodded as if she had been expecting this news for days. I thought she would weep but she did not. In the morning, I understood why, for I found her packing the blue chest with our few belongings.

When I sought to argue, to convince her that she must remain behind, she only shook her head. "I belong to you, Kharnos, just as you, in a way, belong to me. Together, we are strong Apart we are weak. A man going off to war must think only of the battle before him, not grow distracted by need for a woman."

"But the others—the young men Samson has gathered! It won't be fair to them for me to have you around while they—"

She laughed and threw her arms about me. "There are women there, too. Young girls and wives who belong to the men. Who do you think cooks and cares for them while they learn weaponplay?"

She had her way with me, as she always did.

SIX

In the cliffside caves of Etam

The cliffs of Etam lay a score of miles from Zorah, not far from the fertile valley of Ajalon. On the grassy slopes of the valley leading to the cliffs, shepherd boys watched over their flocks, white woolly dots against the lush green grasslands. From time to time as we traveled deeper between the cliffs, we saw a flash of brown where a dog ran barking after an

errant ewe. They were brown and white, those cliffs, streaked with red marl and sandstone.

Upwards of two hundred young men lived in those cliff-side caves, with perhaps thirty older men, hardbitten fellows who knew the use of sword and shield and the manner in which to throw a spear. They were a rabble without discipline, and they came surging down the slopes yelling and shouting in high glee at sight of us. Samson swung on me with pride in his eyes as he gestured in their direction.

"I told you I had an army, Kharnos. Wait till I march against the Philistines with them."

"Twenty men like Chrysax would make mincemeat of this rabble in half an hour. They aren't soldiers, Samson—only eager boys."

He scowled at me, not liking my words. "Easy to say. What they lack in skill they'll make up with eagerness."

"It doesn't work that way. Your best soldier is your cold veteran who knows he has a job to do—which is to kill his enemy—and he goes about it as efficiently, as quickly, as he knows how. He has no hate in him, no eagerness unless it's an eagerness to stay alive so he can bed the next wench who catches his eye."

"You think so?"

"I know so. I was born to a family of warriors. I grew to manhood during the ten years Troy was under attack by the Greeks. I teethed on a shield rim, man."

The Habiru grunted. He rubbed his bearded jaw with a broad palm as he turned over what I told him in his mind. He knew well enough that none of these young men had his own great bodily strength to protect them in battle. Some of them were even slight of build. Their only chance for victory would come if they were able to use their weapons better than the Philistines.

"Can you teach them?"

"If my word is obeyed in all things."

He nodded. "Good enough. I'm no soldier, Yahweh knows. I go my way alone. I also know that alone, I have no chance of standing against Jubaal and his mercenaries. Judah needs an army, the kind of army she used to have in the days of Joshua. Build me an army like that, Kharnos."

He stood before them all with his arms stretched upward. They quieted to hear his words. No talker, he clipped his message short.

"You're a mob, not an army. You couldn't lick your weight

in wild asses, let alone Philistine regulars. Much as I hate them, I have to admit they're good soldiers. But before we're done with you, you'll be their betters."

They cheered him but I saw a few of them glance my way, studying me. Samson saw their eyes move, and put a hand on my shoulder. "This is Kharnos. He's a Trojan, a professional soldier. He's going to teach you how to fight."

A big man laughed, tapping the long dagger at his belt. "I can fight, Samson—better than any foreigner."

I slipped out of my baldric, dropped my shield and helmet. "All right, braggart—put your dagger where your mouth is. Come at me." He came with a rush, naked blade glittering in the sun. I suppose he thought I'd never faced cold iron before. I stepped sideways, caught his wrist and flipped him over on his back. He fell heavily, his dagger flying through the air.

As he lay there blinking up at me, I grinned at him. "You're out of condition, too. That's the first thing we'll do—put some muscle where your flab is."

He looked sheepish and went to get his dagger.

I waited until he was back with the others before I said, "You're going to hate me. Oh, how you'll hate me. Some of you will even want to kill me, I expect. I also tell you—don't try it. First man who does, gets flogged. The first man I find breaking the rules I'm going to lay down does woman's work for a few days. Oh, I see your women up above, peeking from the cave mouths. You'll wash dirty clothes in the brook and help them get the meals. If this sounds too much for any of you, get out of camp by nightfall. You others—the ones who stay—are going to learn how to kill Philistines if I have to half kill you first myself."

To my surprise a few of them looked pleased, though they did not cheer. They saved their cheers for Samson. Well, that was all right with me. My job was to train them to be soldiers, not to test the power of their lungs.

I asked for men who could handle horses, and men who were carpenters, or who knew the difference between a hammer and an adze. Two hundred men are not a very big army but we had to make do with what we had. I told the horse handlers and the carpenters I wanted to speak with them, the others I set to running back and forth on the wide stretch between the river and the cliffs.

"I want to see sweat," I told them.

The carpenters I placed in a semi-circle before me and

told them to sit down. A standing man gains more authority when his audience is on its rump. Bluntly I told them they were a scroungey lot, fit more to carry water buckets than handle weapons. They needed more than mere man-power to win victories over the Philistines and I meant to give it to them.

"You're going to build chariots," I concluded.

One of the Habiru, a bearded man with sword-scars on his upper arms and across a thigh, growled, "We aren't chariot men."

"Not now, but you will be," I answered. "Five chariots, properly driven and fought, are better than a hundred men on foot."

They growled under their breaths and glanced sidewise at one another but I took this as a good sign. Not for me your meek soldiers. Meek at practice, meek in battle. I wanted hungry men, men whose nostrils ached to smell blood. Killers. The thing to do was keep them too busy to think.

"All right, off your rumps! Get wood and asses."

I sent them ranging the countryside with their copper axes for wood. Some went into towns where they bought crude copper and what iron we could afford. The women I made forage for fallen trees and dried camels' dung—we were not far from the caravan trail from Beersheba to Megiddo—to build hot fires.

Samson was amused. "They'll hate you. I'd rather you teach them weaponplay."

"That too, while the chariots are building. Samson, you want to beat the Philistines, don't you? Then let me tell you here and now, a ragamuffin army such as this would be chopped to pieces at the first charge. I'd need a year to train them properly to stand against good spearmen. This way is quicker. Safer. It holds a chance for victory."

He only shook his head.

2.

The days became a week, two weeks, a month.

The men worked and sweated in the hot sun. They panted and gasped and between bellows for the waterskins, cursed me roundly. At first their hate was a lively, personal thing so that I walked alertly with half an eye turned always to my back, but after a while they grew so used to their discomfort that the curses toned down to a steady, monotonous grum-

bling. I matched them company against company and gave them pride and something to work for.

"The team that finishes a chariot first gets a wineskin to themselves," I promised. And when that was done, "The team whose drivers learn to obey the commands of my right hand gets another skin."

For my own driver I chose a youth named Japhet, a beardless boy quick to understand the management of the leather reins. He wanted to fight, so I promised him that he would kill more than any other warrior if he learned to handle the asses right.

"How can I kill a man without a weapon?"

We were sitting at the entrance to a cave, the night sky alive with stars above us, the wind wailing low across the plain stretching from these cliffs of Etam to the plain of Jezreel. The fire was bright red and big, its tongues of flame climbing six, seven feet into the air. Food was warm in our bellies and Mahthys was fetching me a leather jack of Thasian wine. I chuckled and pointed to a tarpaulin strangely humped within the dry recesses of the cave.

"Lift the cover, Japhet. Bring me what you find there."

I saw him go eagerly across the stone floor, throw back the woolen robe. Firelight touched glittering metal. He bent and his hands went out to a six-foot length of polished, sharpened iron. His muscles bulged when he lifted it. The scythe was heavy.

Panting a little, he carried it back to me. "Only Samson could wield a thing like this," he complained, resting its blunt end on the cave floor. His eyes said I was playing with him.

"You'll wield not one, but two of those when we go into battle. Use your reins right and you can kill Philistines by the dozen."

He was too well bred a boy to call me a liar, so I grinned up at him. "They won't be in your hands, ninny—but fastened firmly to the hubs of your chariot wheels. As the wheels go round, they'll rotate. Six feet of sharp iron at each wheel-hub. You get it? Imagine foot soldiers packed together when you go crashing into them."

"They'll drop like grain to the flail!"

"Learn to use your chariot, boy. It's a better weapon than you think."

Japhet told the others. Next day the men growled a little less, looking to me with sober, judging eyes. They were not

enthusiastic about me but they tolerated my presence. They were Habiru, used only to their own customs and to the methods of centuries. Not for them any brash new ideas, even in making war. What their ancestors had done under Joshua, they would do under Samson. They neglected to consider the fact that the Philistines were not the Canaanites who had been content to defend their isolated little cities until they were cut out from under them. The Philistines were a wandering people who had raided along the seacoasts centuries before, who had even attacked great Egypt at the delta. They did not remain behind clay walls when they fought.

Ah, no. The Philistines marched behind a disciplined shield wall. They carried good weapons and knew how to use them. Alongside them, the Habiru were peasants in a volunteer army. I had to alter all that, which meant their very way of thinking must change.

I set them to racing chariots on the long straightaway up to the valley plain until they learned the use of the reins and the speed of the asses we had begged and even stolen from rich Habiru farmers who should have been happy to contribute to their own defense. Then I made them practice turning in a wide place, then in narrow spots. For two weeks I harried them from dawn to dusk every day. Their palms blistered and bled but at the end of that time they knew how to drive and ride a chariot.

Then came the more difficult part. They must learn to cast a spear from a bouncing, dipping platform. The bowmen among them—there were few of these, for the bow is not an Habiru weapon—I made practise archery the same way. We lost spears and arrowshafts by the tens those early days. The men grew discouraged, angry first at themselves and then at me.

Samson had gone away from the caves. He was a lonely man, given much to wandering by himself. Left to his own devices, he would have been content to hand out spears and copper swords and let the men fend for themselves. He was an inspiration but not a soldier. He could pick up anything convenient to his hand and with it slay Philistines; he thought everyone else capable of the same feats. I knew better, being only an ordinary man.

The men held me in no such awed regard as they did Samson. He was a Judge among his people, an honored man. His word they obeyed instantly, without thinking. My command was another matter. Sometimes I had to knock a

man off his feet with a fist to get obedience. It was hard, hot work, for I shared their every exercise, mostly to show them how it was done, then to train them to follow where my chariot led.

Twice I had to fight for my life, once with the scarred man, whose name was Aaron, another time with a youth called Shaphan. Aaron I hit over the head with the flat of my blade, knocking him senseless, Shaphan I disarmed with a blow of my iron sword. These were their leaders, the hot-tempered ones. Aaron I made captain of twenty chariots, Shaphan I appointed captain of the remainder.

"Not because I'm afraid of you," I told them one morning over the cooking fires, "as you both know very well, but because I think you have it in you to be leaders. Fail me and I'll name another man in your stead."

They were sullen but they nodded.

Sometimes I knew despair. There was no spirit of unity in the men. Each was an individual doing a job. Despite what I had taught them, they were no better than a rabble except that now they were a rabble in chariots. I needed to unite them, to give them a pride in one another, but I could think of no way to do it.

The days passed swiftly.

One day while we were wheeling at the command of my upraised arm, I saw a dust cloud approaching from the direction of Zorah. It was a lone rider, flogging his tired mount to greater speed. A cold chill settled in my middle. Only bad news comes this fast.

The rider was a beardless boy scarcely out of puberty. He drew rein, gasping for breath. Sweat streaked his upper body and his eyes were hot black holes in his head.

"Samson! Where is Samson?"

"What man can govern the wind?" I smiled. "Tell me your news, boy. Samson goes and comes when and where he will. One of these days he'll be back."

"The Philistines are marching on Zorah with an army. They've come to seize Samson or raze Zorah to the ground."

An angry growl broke out from the men in their chariots. The boy had been staring at them wonderingly, for chariots were foreign to Habiru eyes. My hand held them to silence.

"What's their route of march?" I asked.

"From Ashkelon to Gath, then on by way of the Jarmuth road northward. They're two days away, I'd judge."

"Go back to Zorah. Tell Manoah to defend his city with

every weapon its men can lay hands on. We march at once. We hope to intercept the Philistines somewhere around Lehi. As for you, go to the cave of Kharnos, tell the woman you find there I said to give you food and drink. Then sleep before you ride back."

The boy nodded. His shoulders slumped with weariness as he sagged on his blanket saddle. He kicked the horse with a bare toe and clung to its mane as it trotted off. I watched him a moment, then swung on the chariots.

"Well, you heard him. You aren't ready to fight yet—but fight you must, it seems." They growled in their beards which showed spirit. "If you want to kill Philistines, you're going to have to do as I say, to obey every command of my hand. Is it understood?"

Aaron spat over the rail of his chariot. His eyes burned in sullen hate at me. My hand tightened on my swordhilt. Were all the long days and hot work to go for nothing? Were all the men of the same mind as this scarred veteran? Did they all believe they knew far more than I, who was their teacher? Despair held my middle like an icy hand.

I gestured to Japhet. "The caves. Let the men say farewell to their women and gather food. We won't have time to scavenge the countryside for it."

Mahthys wept in my arms, hidden by the cave walls from all eyes. "You're going to be killed. I know it. Those men out there won't defend your back. They'll let the Philistines climb into your chariot free as air."

It was what I feared, but I put on a glad face. "You always did see the gloomy side of things," I laughed. "You won't get rid of me so easily, wench. I'll come back to keep you awake of nights making love to me."

She bubbled laughter through her tears, hugging me to her, kissing my lips, my jaw, my throat. Her soft middle thrust at me as if by her sheer femininity she might turn me from this fighting. I had to use force to push her away.

"Keep yourself from harm," I whispered.

I picked up the sack in which she had put food and a waterskin, and walked out into the sunlight. I could hear her sobbing softly in the dimness of the cave behind me.

We went by way of the barren plain that stretches from the cliffs of Etam to the Shephaleh, traveling at a steady pace which tired neither men nor horses. I ordered frequent rests for I meant to ride through the cool night. The men grum-

bled at this news, as they grumbled at everything I said or did that involved their discomfort.

I ignored their growls and frowning faces; otherwise I might have lost my temper and done one of them an injury. I needed every hand at reins or weapons if we were to stop the Philistines. I rode with my face to the front and tried to listen only to the pounding of the wheels over the rocky terrain of this wasteland.

We moved through the setting sun and the faint blue of early twilight that deepened slowly to the darkness of night. There was a crescent moon in the sky and by its light and the pale stars we rattled and bounced toward Lehi.

Toward morning we heard a man bellowing to the west.

In a little while, I recognized the voice as that of Samson. I halted the chariots the better to hear.

"Kharnos! Kharnos! Can you hear me?"

I shouted back, then bade the men dismount from the chariots and rest. As dawn tinted the land a dull crimson, Samson came walking up as if he were on a stroll.

I gripped his hand, told him what had happened. He nodded, letting his deepset eyes range across the men and their chariots. I saw approval in his face.

"I know about the Philistine army," he said. "A great delegation of my people met me, told me that the Philistines would destroy their cities unless I gave myself up."

"You don't intend to follow such advice?"

"Yes, I think I do. If anything happens to me, it will be the will of Yahweh. My people will be spared. I will have died in a good cause."

I argued. I told him he was a fool, that he was throwing over the results of all my work. "They are no trained army, these men, but they will fight. At least give them the chance." I argued, I pleaded; but he would not be swayed.

"What is to be, will be."

He ate with us, then walked on alone. I waited until he was out of sight, then gave the signal to follow at a walk. If Samson insisted on giving himself up, there was nothing I could do to prevent it. But there was nothing to stop me from attempting a rescue.

All morning long we trailed that distant figure that was no larger than a dot in our eyes. The men were silent for a change, being too occupied with worry about their hero to concern themselves about me. I think they would have turned back when Samson declared his intention of giving himself

up; none of them would have dared disobey his hinted order. If Samson wanted to surrender, he had a reason for it. The fact that Yahweh willed it was enough. Only their habit of following me kept them on the trail.

To Japhet I said, "The fact that I'm here at all is also Yahweh's will, if you want to look at it that way. And what I do, I do in accordance with that will."

It was logic which he could not refute. I saw him going among the campfires at our next rest, speaking with little groups of men. From time to time they nodded and turned to stare at me. I wondered if what I had said would make any difference to them.

Trailing after Samson all day long was slow work. He was a fast walker but a chariot can go many times faster than the most energetic man on foot. We held the asses to a walk. It was a little before sunset when we came to the top of a rise and saw Samson facing the Philistines.

There must have been three thousand of them, at a guess, big men in leather armour hung with copper plates, with leather helmets set with boar's tusks and copper squares. They leaned on their spears, shields slung over their backs, and watched Jubaal talk to the Habiru strongman.

The sun was behind us, for which I was thankful. In its glinting rays we could move about without attracting attention. My upraised arm fanned the chariots to either side of me; when they were in position, the sheer bluffs of the hill behind us served partially to camouflage our presence. We waited for what was to happen.

At one time, this had been a slaughtering ground, where men had come to hunt lions. Many bones were scattered about, white and gleaming in the dying sun. The air was very dry and when the chariots stilled, we could hear their voices.

Jubaal said, "Samson, you are my prisoner."

And Samson replied, "Again I tell you, only if you can capture me. I won't go willingly, Philistine." We all saw him bend and pick up something white and curved. I strained my eyes to see what Samson held. It was the jawbone of an ass.

Jubaal stared down at Samson. I could see that Jubaal kept the stump of his right hand ridden in his cloak. It must have been a galling thing to such a proud man. Under his crested helmet his face was brown and hard, with its nose mashed a little to one side where my fist had hit it. There

was nothing wrong with his voice, however; it carried far in the still air.

"Don't be a fool. What can you do against an army?"

"My God will help me."

Jubaal hooted. "Your God!" He made a sign with his left hand. Twenty soldiers leaped forward, spears extended.

My eyes went to the left, along the chariots ranged there, then to the right. Behind us there were more, perhaps sixty all told. Each chariot had a driver and two warriors. We numbered no more than two hundred men. It was folly, suicide, to fight a trained army numbering three thousand men.

"Samson holds the jawbone of an ass," I told them. "You men drive asses. Remember what I've taught you. The scythes on either side of your chariots will be asses' teeth—quick to bite, strong to tear and rend. See you use them as you should."

My arm went forward. Japhet gave the reins a little shake. The big grey asses harnessed to my pole lunged into the traces. They were the biggest, the strongest, the swiftest animals I could find; I wanted no other man ahead of me in the charge. I lifted a spear and held it at the ready.

Samson was backing from the grinning Philistines advancing on him with their spears held out. I saw the jawbone lift, saw it shaken back and forth. The soldiers grinned at him, called out crude jokes. Then the sound of the pounding hooves and rattling wheels came to them.

They wheeled and shouted at sight of us.

Forty chariots abreast, with a second wave fifty feet behind us, we thundered down the long slope. Already the bowmen were in action. I saw shafts lift into the air, fly hard and true. Some of the Philistines fell under that arrow hail. The others wheeled about frantically, lifting their shields, trying to come to a position of defense.

We hit them as might a giant flail. The long scythes cut through legs and bodies, rotating so swiftly they blurred to invisibility in the dying sunlight. Men screamed on every side. I thrust with my spear, drove its point into a man's throat; jerked it free and thrust again at a second man. Japhet drove well. He handled the asses as he had been taught, coolly and with skill, remembering always that the long scythes were like weapons to be wielded by his chariot.

We cut through the Philistines, leaving a bloody swathe in our wake. After us came the second wave, with the Habiru

screaming in delight at seeing their enemies falling, writhing on the ground or running to escape those butchering hub-blades. The asses could run faster than a man. The second wave caught the Philistines where the first had missed, and cut through them as a knifeblade slips through water.

By this time our first onslaught was turning, veering about and coming back. We could not have done what we did if the Philistines had known of our presence. All they had seen was their enemy, the mighty Samson. He occupied all their thoughts. It was as if we had sprung from the Earth itself.

Ah, and Samson! He was magnificent.

With only the white length of a jackass's jawbone in his hands, he laid about him with a will. The white teeth and bone were streaked with blood, now. I saw him lift his strange weapon, drive it at a Philistine, saw the Philistine go down with his throat shredded.

There was no time to see more. Japhet was leaning forward, shaking the reins, calling to the animals, sending them at a crazy gallop straight for the thickest grouping of the Philistines. We careened into them with my spear jabbing, thrusting, sharp scythes turning swiftly. We felt a jar, the chariot tilted.

The platform righted itself as I cut down two men, then impaled a third by throwing my lance at him. My fingers twisted about the braided haft of the iron sword of Gilgamesh. My shield lifted to ward off a thrown axe. Then Japhet was shouting at the asses who were bursting free of the press, carrying us on and up the slope.

I put a hand on the rail, turned to stare back.

On either side, other chariots were slicing a path through the enemy. One was on its side, a knot of fighting men about its occupants. I saw another veer to the rescue, saw spears and sword flash. A man leaped into the chariot, then another. The asses galloped away.

The second wave came on before the first was fully gone and in the confusion, all discipline gave way among the Philistines. Officers roared themselves hoarse but the men had no belly to stand any longer against those hub-blades that sliced through their bodies so easily. Spears and bows they could stand against but the long knives at those axles were another matter.

"We've got them disorganized, afraid," I told Japhet.

He turned the chariot on the slope. Behind us the others were following his example. I risked a glance at the faces of

the drivers, the warriors. Each of them was alive with that strange rapport which fills men who fight shoulder to shoulder against a common enemy. No longer were they individuals, but a team. They watched for my uplifted hand, then did what I commanded.

Again we charged, recklessly and with seeming carelessness. We came rattling and bumping down the slope and onto the level plain at full speed. The bowmen were picking off such officers as they could reach, further sending panic through the enemy, who did not even attempt to stand against this third charge. They threw away their weapons and their shields and ran. The chariots caught them in the open, mowed them down with the hub blades. Occasionally a Habiru would lean over the rail and drive his spear into a Philistine but mostly it was the work of drivers and asses that did the killing. Beside me I could hear young Japhet chanting some kind of hymn. His black hair flew behind him and there were tears of joy on his young, sun-bronzed face.

We reined up at last because of the gathering darkness. Had we begun our battle even an hour earlier, every last Philistine would have died on the plain of Lehi that afternoon. As it was, someone later counted over a thousand dead. It was the greatest victory the Habiru had ever won over the Philistines.

Aaron was standing beside Samson when Japhet brought my chariot to a halt. The scarred man was looking at me and grinning. "I've been telling Samson how much we hated your guts, Trojan—and how much we love you, now."

Japhet said, "Only you could have done it, Kharnos—you and these chariots you made us build."

"The will of Yahweh?" I asked Samson with a grin.

He nodded soberly, then chuckled. "Aye, His will." He still had the jawbone in his hand. It was broken now, but it had been a grim, efficient weapon for a while. He sighed, "I suppose the story will get around that I did all this killing by myself, with this jawbone. Likely the survivors will spread such a tale. It will make them appear less a failure to be overcome by a supernatural happening than by a force of only sixty chariots."

He knew human nature, did this man. "Now what?" I asked. He frowned down at the ground, shaking his head. "I'm not sure. I have the feeling that Jubaal will have had a bellyful of us this day, that he'll be content to crawl behind the walls of Ashkelon and lick his wounds. I fetched him a glancing

blow with the jawbone when he tried to cleave my skull with a sword. I hit his shoulder but the mail under his tunic probably saved him from anything worse than a bruise. His men came then and carried him away."

His bushy black brows knotted. "Another thing. I saw that Philistine—Chrysax, I think you said his name was. He kept shouting your name, looking around for you. When Jubaal fell, it was Chrysax who caught him."

"He isn't dead?" I cried in surprise.

"I broke his neck but it must have knitted back again. Though to be sure, he carried it at an odd angle, almost on his shoulder."

"Life has a way of evening things up. We'll meet again."

"I think it will, too. Be on your guard."

The chariots came back across the rocky ground, raising dust. I counted them with a practiced eye. Three over fifty, I made it; seven lost. Not too bad a price to pay for saving the Habiru strongman and killing close to a thousand Philistines. The drivers reined in their teams twenty feet away and stood in ranks as I had taught them.

There was a difference in them. They had fought a real battle, had killed men and lost comrades. Shoulder to shoulder they had charged against their old enemy and routed him. Pride was a flame in their eyes and in their bellies. I would have not more trouble with them. They were veterans.

3.

Life among the caves of Etam settled down to unvarying monotony after our return from the plain of Lehi. After the victory feastings and the braggings, the display of captured weapons and other battle trophies, the men were content to drill during the day and feast and make love to the women at night. It was a peaceful, happy time. Being wanderers without a home, Mahthys and I were especially pleased at the way our lives were assuming a pattern.

"It isn't much, this cave," she told me one night, creeping into my arms where I lay on a bed of mosses covered by a blanket, my feet to the cave-fire in its ring of stones, "but it's our home and I'm just as happy as if it were a palace."

I squeezed her against me, let her pillow her head on my chest. For Mahthys who had been a slave ever since her twelfth year, and who may have known no better, happiness was an easy goal. Not so for me.

In my dreams I walked the streets of Ilion joking with Hector, with Aeneas, with Paris. I watched as fair Helen presided like a goddess of beauty at a feast. My lips savored the fruitiness of Cretan wine, the pulpy ripeness of chilled pomegranates. My eyes beheld the painted splendor of our walls, their murals done in vivid reds and blues and yellows as they told the story of Uranus and Gaea and their unruly children, the Titans and the Cyclops, and the rape of Europa by the bull. I leaned against one of the red painted pillars of the palace. I sat on a marble bench and listened to a Trojan fountain splash.

My waking hours were something else again. In the visions sent me by Morpheus, who is the god of sleep and dreams, I drank from rubied rhythons and supped off golden platters. In the caves I drank from a leather cup and ate steaming lamb off a wooden board. There were no fountains in this dry wilderness, only the hot sun beating down incessantly, day after day. No marble bench or chair inlaid with ebony and lapis lazuli received my weight. I squatted like a savage on my thighs or used a flat rock.

Dissatisfaction is father to restlessness and rebellion. My dreams of Delilah I put down to eating overmuch corn with the evening meal or sampling too heavily the cheap wine the merchants sold in Gezar. But the other dreams—where I was once again a rich and honored prince of Troy—ah, these were harder to forget. I could assuage my flesh in that of Mahthys when my memories of Delilah grew too importunate. I could do nothing about the resentment at fate which grew in me when I remembered Ilion.

I could have driven the men to harder practice, I suppose; I needed to vent my spleen on something; but then word came from Zorah that the Philistines were done wtih fighting Samson and his war-chariots. Somebody mentioned me. It seems I had been recognized by Chrysax, after all. Jubaal blamed me for his defeat as well as for his lost hand and mashed nose. Our informant said he fell to the ground now and foamed at the mouth when my name was spoken. I think the man from Zorah meant to compliment me and so stretched the truth about that fact, however. On one thing we were all agreed: the men of Ashkelon had had their bellyful of fighting.

Samson might have disbanded his little army but the men had come to enjoy their life in the caves; they looked on it as a holiday, especially since the rich merchants back home

were taxed for their support. The news of the victory over the Philistines was good for business. Money moved freely. Investments were made in camel caravans to Egypt and north into Cilicia and Phoenicia. Where men make money, they give it away more easily. The pay coffers for the little army arrived regularly and on time; I suppose the merchants thought it a cheap way of keeping up prosperity.

I was not the only one to feel the bite of inactivity. Samson took to rising even earlier than dawn and taking long walks in the first red glow of sunrise. When I waked and went to the cave ledge to savor the cool morning air I would see him moving far out on the plain, a tiny mote striding with inexorable steps.

Sometimes I would wonder at Samson. My own unrest I could understand; it was born of my past, of the luxury in which I had always lived until three years ago. His unease was another matter. It was at times like this, when all the world was hushed before the coming day that I grew contemplative. Did he sense some ultimate destiny for which he was marked and was he impatient to be about it? Or was it only the raw vitality of the man that must seek escape in these eternal wanderings as the flooding river seeks escape by bursting its banks? I had no answer. I only watched and waited.

It was Aaron who supplied a clue of sorts. "He's been like this before. Usually it means he wants a woman, a foreign woman. He used to wander like a lost lamb before he married that wench in Timnath. Even when he was younger he did the same thing. It used to drive Manoah his father to distraction but the old man has become used to it over the years. Anyhow, he sees Samson rarely these days."

One morning when I woke earlier than usual, I went with him, walking silently and stride for stride. Until noon we wandered, when we came to a clear brook flowing down from the mountains of Ephraim. Throwing ourselves belly down, we drank our fill, then sought the shade of a carob tree.

"Kharnos, I'm going to Gath," Samson told me. "We need supplies. We have plenty of money to buy luxuries, good wine, new clothes."

"Is that wise? Gath is a Philistine city. Surely someone will recognize you there, perhaps try to capture you."

"I fear no Philistines."

"Perhaps not, but for you to expose yourself to an un-

necessary risk is a foolish business. Jubaal will not have forgotten nor forgiven the fact that you beat him in battle twice. If he hears you're in Gath he'll make every effort to make you prisoner."

"What is fated, will be."

"I won't let you go alone," I told him.

Samson looked uncomfortable. I remembered what Aaron had said about his needing foreign women. I said, "Suppose we make up a group, with asses for pack animals. I could stand a bit of a change myself. We can camp outside the walls. No need for all of us to go inside. You and I, perhaps. We can do the buying. The others need come only to bring back the goods."

It was a suggestion that appealed to him. He could not be burdened by a return journey. He would be his own man once the marketing had been done, without obligation to see it brought back to the caves. His big hand slapped my knee.

"Tell some of the others today. Take a few men, a couple of women. No more than five or six in all."

Mahthys insisted that she go. The restlessness I had been feeling lay deep in her, too; she just hid it better than I. She was an Egyptian, not a nomad like the Habiru, and was used to walled towns and cities, to a cosmopolitan life. There was such eagerness in her face, it seemed almost to shine.

"All right, all right," I laughed. "You go, you and another woman. Select whom you will. I go to choose the men."

A score of men wanted to go with us, so we had to select them by lots. Samson had said a party of five or six, but I took along a dozen, with the two women. Under their woolen traveling cloaks I made them carry swords. Gath was no Zorah where an Habiru could walk freely and say what he would. It was one of the five united towns of Philistia, and Habiru men were not popular at the moment.

The campfires were glowing redly next morning when we set out, Samson in the lead with four asses being led by rope reins behind him. Mahthys and a woman named Zilpah were seated on two of the animals. Later, after our noon rest, they would move over onto the other asses. The rest of us followed casually, walking not like soldiers but like servants of rich merchants on a holiday. I wanted nothing to remind the Gathites of the recent fight at Lehi. My fine armor was left behind, wrapped in wool and stored in a teakwood coffer. Only my iron sword I would not part with, carrying it slung over a shoulder on its belt.

We had plenty of food and enough wine to keep up our spirits. Nor were we in any hurry. At our night camp Mahthys sang Egyptian songs and Zilpah danced for our entertainment. She was a pretty thing, dark of skin and with lustrous black hair. She belonged to Shaphan, who was with us, Aaron remaining in command back at the caves.

It took us a day and a half to reach Gath. We could have made better time but we rested often and a few of the men indulged too heartily in wine at our camp so that our start in the morning was delayed. Not until the sun was high in the noon sky did we sight the red walls of Gath, see the palm trees of its oasis well outside the bronze gates and catch a few glimpses of its flat roof tops.

A caravanserai had been set up outside the walls, along the road which curved away from the coast to touch at Gath and Ekron before it swung back to Japno. Colored tents and canopies had been raised where sweetmeats and honeycakes might be purchased. A young girl was playing a zither while a little monkey hopped about catching the tiny copper coins the onlookers tossed at it. Beyond her there were stalls where a man could purchase pottery and bronze craters, amber amulets, gold rings or fine ivory statues. The smell of cooking food was in the air.

The prosperity which Zorah and other Habiru cities were enjoying seemed also to be shared by Gath. A great concourse of city dwellers was here, moving among the stalls, buying or bartering. There was noise and dust and a great confusion. A girl squealed between delight and anger when a pinch made her jump. Elsewhere a woman laughed suddenly, lightly and easily. The voices of men haggling over prices made a sober overtone for all other sounds.

The soldiers from the caves, so long used only to their hard existence, gaped and goggled. Their elbows nudged one another, calling attention to a canopied platform where a naked girl shook her breasts and wriggled her hips at the onlookers. She was one of a number of traveling harlots owned by a dour Egyptian who sat like a graven image in a striped claft at a small table toying with stacks of coins. Smaller tents behind the platform showed where a man might bed down with whatever dancing girl caught his fancy.

"You'd never see that in an Habiru city," Shaphan said critically. "We are a more moral people than these pagans."

One of the younger men hung back, obviously taken by

the fleshy dancer. "Pagan customs have something to recommend them," he said appreciatively. Shaphan pushed him ahead roughly, crying, "Enough of this nonsense. We didn't come here to sample any fleshpots."

A couple of the men looked at each other, grinning. When Shaphan turned his back, they would come to the dancing platform and pay their money to go with the girls into the little tents. They had been living a monastic life in the caves and were tired of it.

Mahthys and Zilpah went to work at once, wandering in and out of the booths and canopied stalls, judging the goods on display. Gath could offer a lot to the eye. It lay on this inward bend of the coastal road, and was served both by the Philistine and Phoenician ships that docked at the wharves of Ashkelon and Jopha and by the caravans that came out of Egypt aimed at Damascus and Edessa. I saw Mahthys handling a white shawl flecked with the gold for which the weavers of Cos are so famous. Regretfully she let it slide from her fingers. As I followed Samson toward the open bronze gates, I told myself to purchase it for her on our return.

The big Habiru walked as if he owned the street. His wide shoulders brushed men and women out of the way; the snarls and curses his conduct caused died out at sight of his bearded bulk. I slipped along in his wake as a dolphin will sometimes trail after a Greek penteconter.

He was bound for the great marketplace of Gath. Only the merchants of a city could sell their goods in its great city square, or the food sellers from neighboring farms. As a result, many of the better class of citizen were to be found here, glancing over a vase of green Laconian porphyry or a votive bowl of hammered gold. Here were fine cattle and mighty hides of great bulls, ready to be made into fine garments or to be used to ornament great shields. Weapons made by master craftsmen, pretty girls trained in the love arts, the figurines of horned Dagon and wanton Ashtaroth, woven materials, ripe fruit, rings and bracelets, all could be purchased here. To these lures came the women of Gath and their servants.

Samson paused to draw breath at the edge of the square, putting his hands on his hips and teetering on his toes. The wind stirred his thick black hair and his beard and the bearskin kaunake he wore about his deep chest. There was an

animality in him that reached out into the air around him like a living force.

I saw a woman wearing a wide-brimmed sunshade hat pause to glance at him flirtatiously before moving on, her white chiton rippling to her stride. Another halted her sedan chair while she debated beckoning to him; almost reluctantly she signalled her bearers to continue. I saw the curtains stir when she looked back.

He moved between the shoppers. There was a faint smile on his lips and his eyes were impish. I marveled that a man so big could move so gracefully, so quietly. Now there was no barreling forward, no sidewise brush of an arm or shoulder to clear a path. Instead his hand moved to a shapely shoulder momentarily caressing it, sliding downward to a hip. The women invariably turned and looked up at him. Some of them smiled, some merely shook their heads. Only one frowned as if indignant at his touch.

Once he paused with an indrawn breath as his palm stroked a rounded buttock through a thin linen robe. I saw the woman smile and walk away, swinging her hips flirtatiously. I expected him to follow but he only stood watching, mouth a little open as if he savored the very air where the woman had walked.

As if noticing me for the first time, he turned his head. "I am shopping, you see. Just as a buyer studies an urn or a table before paying over his money, so I study women." My mouth was a little open, for he chuckled. "I watch the way they walk and the manner of their smile. I look deep into their eyes. Is making love a task or a pleasure to them? Does their skin press back against my hand when I touch them? Or does it shrink away as might a slave from the branding iron? All these things are important, Kharnos."

"Cybele of the caresses," I breathed, half in awe.

"A man can learn many things about a woman just from touching her, by looking at her smile, her face. Is the malachite applied to her eyelids cleverly, so that it enhances her beauty? Or is it layered there as a man might slap down clay to make a brick?"

A woman moved past. Samson stepped against her, reached out gently and took her breast in his palm. She was slim and very white, with brown hair.

"A cold piece, that," he growled, looking after her.

"You can tell that just from a casual caress?" I was between

irritation—thinking that perhaps he mocked me—and laughter. He was so serious, so very intent on what he did, that laughter might have been out of place.

"Her lips are thin, which indicates a stingy disposition. Stingy in one thing, stingy in the other. And see how she minces along. She thinks well of herself, the minx. Probably leads her husband about by the nose and makes him like it. Pah, that type isn't for me. I want a woman whose flesh is warm to the touch, whose eyes have a fever in them."

I shook my head as I plunged on after him through the throng. Had I touched these women as did Samson, there would have been screams and outcries. He went among them, sampling them by palm and fingertips, and they looked at him and melted.

A gathering sound swung us toward a broad thoroughfare where men and women pushed and shoved, flying as if to escape some danger. Almost instantly I heard the drumbeat of pounding hoofs, the rattle of chariot-wheels. Some pampered son of a rich parent, or a young nobleman out to impress the people, had chosen this moment to drive his team across the marketplace.

I saw a man go down, roll over.

Two black horses—big Egyptians—came at the gallop, foam flecking their lips, eyes rolling, manes whipping. Upright in a small racing chariot was a young man with curly yellow hair; a Greek, I thought, an Achaean as Achilles had been, half barbarian.

His whip went out over the flattened ears of his horses. It made a loud sound. The chariot bounced over a stone, flew through the air, the driver battling it with his weight. The wheels landed on the flagging, scraped an instant, then spun swiftly as the chariot fled on.

There was a sedan chair directly in the path of the oncoming team. The driver gave a shout, loosed the reins so they flapped a little and cracked his whip again. The madman intended to jump the litter. It was an insane thought.

Samson bellowed, "There's a woman in it. She's fainted!" He sped away from me, racing swiftly.

The chariot came on. Even if the horses cleared the curtained chair, the wheels would hit it, splinter its uprights, perhaps even hit the woman I could see slumped in the cushions. Evidently she had tried to get away, then either

caught her garment on a projection or just fainted in terror at sight of what was bearing down on her.

Samson angled his run to come between the horses and the sedan chair a yard from the helpless woman. I caught my breath. He allowed himself no leeway to swing the horses to either side. He would be caught between them, borne backward by their impetus, crushed on the wooden chair handles!

His huge hands went out as his arms stretched to their utmost. He seemed to fly as he left his feet. He came down on the flaggings with both legs planted firmly, his mighty thighs spread wide apart. The hands he stretched out had caught the silvered bits and bridles. His massive shoulder thumped into that of the near horse.

The animals rose into the air. At the same instant, Samson swung his arms. His hands still gripped the bridles, so that the horses' heads moved not at all. Only their bodies shifted, flying sideways and whipping the chariot about as if it had been no more than a toy. The blond youth went flying through the air as if shot from a catapult. He landed hard on the square flaggings and lay inert.

People came running. A man roared, "That's Phaestron, the Tyrant's son! He'll have that big man flayed for this. Dagon send he isn't dead—or we'll all pay dearly."

I ran for Samson, tried to make him understand our danger. He was busy reaching into the sedan chair, gently freeing the woman's chiton where it had caught on a metal projection—a copper ornament carved to resemble the horned god—then lifting her into his arms.

"Lead the way, Kharnos, Quickly!"

He carried her as if she had been a babe. The people made way for us, not daring to prevent our leaving. They only cast frightened glances, then closed ranks about the unmoving Phaestron. I heard someone shouting for a physician.

I ran lightly into a narrow alleyway, followed its curving length to a wider avenue where the houses were built of marble and surrounded by gardens and rows of ilex trees. Samson followed at a trot, bearing his unconscious burden easily. When I judged that we had come a safe distance from the marketplace, I halted and waited for the Habiru to catch up to me.

He was staring down into the face of the woman. It was a pretty enough face, curved and with over full lips, eyelids

tinted green and black brows plucked. Many rings on her fingers almost hid their slim length, but there was henna on the nails and her hands showed evidence of much care. Either she was an expensive harlot or a woman of substance.

She stirred, moaning slightly. As memory came fully to her, her eyes flew open. She gasped and tried to twist free of the arms that held her.

"Easy, little dove," murmured Samson.

She stared up at him. Her mouth opened and a tonguetip came out to moisten her lips. "Wh-where am I? Wh-what happened? I remember Phaestron driving his chariot right at me. I tried to get out. My chiton caught and held. Then I must have fainted."

Her body had relaxed almost bonelessly. Outside of that first instinctive effort to be free, she made no further more. Her eyes widened as she held them on Samson. "You must have saved me. Otherwise I'd be dead."

"I saw you needed help," he rumbled. "I gave it to you. I'm afraid we couldn't wait for your sedan chair, though. The people seemed quite upset at what happened to the blond boy."

"Phaestron. An unruly colt," she nodded. "His father thinks the sun rises and sets on him. There'll be trouble because of this."

"For you?"

Her head shook, making her glossy black locks dance. "For you, perhaps—if you injured the boy."

"He brought it on himself."

I explained what had happened and asked if we might see her to her house. She seemed pleased at that thought, and put a hand on her chiton to set it to rights. When Samson finally put her on her feet, she leaned against him, letting him know the feel of her body, smiling invitingly.

"You must come with me, both of you," she invited. When she saw Samson scowl, she ran scented fingertips across his lips. "I am a widow. I live with my younger sister. If I brought you home with me—and no one for her—she'd claw my eyes out."

I thought of Mahthys outside the walls.

Samson clapped my back and put an arm about my shoulders. It was like an ox-yoke, resting there. Like a dumb beast I went where the woman led.

SEVEN

The house of the woman of Gath

Her name was Tamar.

She was well out of her girlhood but there were no streaks of grey in her black hair, and there was a liveliness to her walk that made me suspect Samson had chosen well. Her tongue wagged merrily enough. She held back no secrets, she was rich and let us know it. Her husband had been a dealer in Lebanese cedar; the Tyrant of Gath had built a palace of the red wood, had given him contracts to sell his cedars by caravan to Damascus, to Memphis in Egypt, even as far as Cilicia which the Habiru called Kue.

Tamar lived in the largest house on a street named Asherah. A stone fence surrounded grass plots and a large garden. I paused a moment in the gateway, listening to the purl of fountain waters. In Ilion, my home had possessed just such a garden. Homesickness choked me as I remembered my dreams in the caves of Etam.

A slave bowed us under the great stone lintel. Tamar slipped out of her traveling cloak, stood revealed in a clinging red chiton bordered by gold threads. A chain of silver links belted her slender waist. The chiton was sleeveless, held at her smooth shoulders by interwoven knots. She held out a hand to me.

"Come, I want you to meet my sister."

She gave me the feeling that after she introduced me, she would let me fend for myself. As they had walked along, she and the big Habiru had been exchanging little intimacies, caresses of the hand and whispered nonsense from which they had excluded me. Tamar would have been happier, I thought, if Samson had been alone.

We went through the outer hall into an open court pillared on three sides by shadowed porticoes. The yard was flagged. To one side a fieldstone well supported a bronze-bound bucket. Tamar walked swiftly, without glancing back, moving toward a pillared *exedra*, a kind of porch where during the summer months people might sit at ease in the shade. There was a stonework outer staircase leading up to a second floor, which in houses of this kind were used for sleeping quarters.

A gong was suspended from between two wooden pillars. Tamar lifted its hammer and sent a deep, resonant note floating through the air. "Tiamat," she called. "A visitor to see you."

I heard the scratch of curtain rings overhead and the patter of swiftly moving feet. The leather curtain hanging across the stone stairway was thrust back and a woman stood in the doorway, one bare arm upraised so that her fingers clutched the curtain, the other hand on her curving hip.

She was younger than Tamar, with a flood of thick red hair hanging over her shoulders and down her back. Thin gauze trousers of the type called *chalwar* were belted low. Above her painted navel she was naked except for a golden collar, bracelets on her arms, and long enameled earrings.

She smiled lazily. "I am a dancer. I've been practising my steps. Tomorrow night the Tyrant gives a state feast for a visiting prince."

I turned to speak to Tamar but she was gone. An amused laugh made me glance again at Tiamat. "You did not come alone, I see—not with Tamar in such a rush to give you into my care. Who is he?"

"He?"

"The man who interests my sister."

"A friend of mine, an Habiru from Zorah."

Her shoulders moved in a careless shrug, lifting her breasts. Her nipples were startlingly red. When I lifted my stare to her face, she was smiling languidly.

"Come, stranger. It makes no difference who your friend is. The gods sent you to me. I think I shall burn an incense cone in gratitude before the night is very far advanced."

Her fingers were almost feverishly hot, moist from perspiration, as she wrapped them about my hand. Standing with her bare back to the leather curtain, she held it aside as she drew me into the cool hall that gave entrance to the stonework staircase. Her body was fragrant with musk and the heavy perfumes of Punt. I let my bare upper arm brush against her as I stepped past.

The contact made her catch her lower lip between her teeth. Tiny fires came alive in her sloe eyes which I found bold and challenging. In such a manner had the pampered women of Ilion looked at me when they invited me to their bedchambers in the days when Troy was under siege. Lonely

women they had been, widows, their husbands long since slain on the battlefield, their bodies desperately hungry. I was not unresponsive to this woman who was like an erotic dream come alive. My body was alert to her sensual appeal, to the painted nipples, the transparent trousers that revealed her slim legs so honestly.

Her eves lowered as she walked ahead of me to the stone stairs. Her buttocks moved before my eyes, naked under thin black gauze, while I followed her up the treads. My palms itched to stroke her flesh, to catch and hold her helpless to my kisses.

We came into a large low room, the walls painted in blues and white, with figures of dolphins diving through the waves, naked nereids astride them. A wooden bench was built into one long wall and held urns filled with flowers.

Three young girls sat crosslegged on cushions, staring at us. Their pale hands held musical instruments. One of them was sipping honeyed wine from a shallow kylix.

Tiamat waved a hand at them, saying, "My accompanists, who make the music to which I dance. Theda plays the kithara, Ida the psaltery, Melissa the flute." Her hands clapped. "Ida, fetch wine for our visitor." Her red mouth twisted with amusement. "I don't even know your name!"

"Kharnos of Ilion."

"A Trojan? I don't believe I've ever seen a Trojan before," Tiamat smiled. The girls leaned their heads together, whispering and giggling as they stared at me. The woman glanced at them and they were still.

She crossed to a tripod table that held an ornate golden headdress in the shape of a golden fan. This she lifted and set it upon her red head so that it rested crosswise, its carved petals reaching upward, tipped with jewels. From it fell a number of golden pendants which tinkled together musically as she moved

"One last dance, Kharnos—then we shall sup together."

A hand strummed the taut strings of the kithara. The flute and psaltery joined in. Music came throbbing from their instruments, quickening the blood, lifting the listener out of himself and making him part of it. I sat enchanted by their skill.

A bare foot stamped the floor.

Tiamat rippled from her bare feet to the golden fan on her thick red hair. She was like a snake, boneless. Without

moving from the spot where she stood, her body twisted lazily, up and down. Her shoulders quivered. Her belly rotated. Her breasts moved rhythmically. Now her arms joined in weaving gracefully and without pause.

Her eyes were bold on mine. I saw her hips lift and thrust at me as if she offered herself for my enjoyment. One leg lifted and swung. Then she was sliding across the floor, hips shaking, arms extended.

As she danced, she began to sing in a husky voice about a woman named Inuitta who had worshipped the goddess for many years and who had gone, as was the custom, to the Temple grounds to offer herself to the embrace of a stranger. By ill fortune it was her fate always to return home as virgin as when she arrived to worship. Never did she give up hope. Always Inuitta came back to the Temple, yet always she went away unassuaged.

And then one day when Inuitta sat with her cloak about her face, grieving that the sailors and other common men who came to the gardens to do honor to Ashtaroth constantly ignored her, the goddess herself came to visit her temple. As is the way of the gods, who know so much more of mortal men and women than we know ourselves, Ashtaroth saw the woman and understood her sorrow. It pleased the goddess that Inuitta should grieve because never once had she been privileged to serve her in the carnal orgies sacred to her eyes.

Ashtaroth wanted to reward her worshipper. But how?

Obviously no mere man would serve her purpose. Only a great hero would do. Inuitta must have only the best. Looking out across the world, Ashtaroth saw a young man named Bargal living in a modest home in the land of the Mitanni. He was their greatest warrior. The goddess called to him. Bargal left his fields half furrowed and, carrying only his armor and a waterbag, came across a desert and a mountain to answer the need of Ashtaroth. It took many months for a walking man to make such a journey. The months stretched to a year, two years. Bargal was captured by bandits and sold into slavery. He labored long, then was given the opportunity to escape and took it. He remembered his journey to the Temple of Ashtaroth and resumed it.

When he came finally to the Temple, his hair was grey and there were many lines in his face. He walked to a seated woman and stood staring down at her. It was Inuitta. She too

had grown old, waiting. Gone was their young strength, their beauty.

Despairing, for this was the first man ever to approach her to share with him the embrace of the goddess, Inuitta called out to Ashtaroth. Hearing, the goddess came and took them by their hands and walked with them. As they walked the years fell away from both Inuitta and from Bargal so that once again they were young and strong.

All that night and for most of the next day, Inuitta and Bargal shared the same bed. Their strength was inexhaustible. They never tired of giving themselves to one another, or of this mad pleasure which was so sacred to the goddess.

It is said that in a corner of the temple gardens one can see Inuitta and Bargal to this day, eternally young, still beautiful, as they walk its flagstoned paths hand in hand.

The music stilled. Tiamat stood before me, arms upraised, holding her final pose. When she laughed throatily and sank low, I beat my palms together and cried, "Iol Iol" She glanced at me from beneath lowered lashes, smiling faintly.

One of the little musicians ran up with a white woolen robe and threw it about the woman. Casually she tied its drawstrings about her nakedness. "We will sup now, you and I. The evening has just begun."

A girl was lighting the oil boats. Through the window recesses I could see dusk covering the rooftops of the city. There was a strange lassitude in my body, induced by the dancing of Tiamat and her song. I wanted to catch and hold her to me, but I understood that by waiting for her to come to me, I would know more pleasure than if I tried to hurry her.

While the girls prepared the meal, Tiamat and I wandered onto the balcony to stare upward at the stars. She told me a little about herself. She had been born in distant Ephesus. She and her sister Tamar had become dancers and their fame had ranged wide through the land. When Tamar's dead husband Chinar had been a young merchant he had come through Ephesus with a caravan from Philistia. He had seen Tamar and had been overcome by her beauty. He married her, taking her away to live in Gath, which was his home.

When Chinar died, Tamar had sent for Tiamat.

"That was when I first danced for Gibbethon who is Tyrant in Gath," she said, leaning on the balcony rail. "He was

pleased to enjoy my performance. Now he summons me often to dance for him. Tomorrow I perform again for—"

A distant outcry interrupted her. The early night sky was alive with redness to the south as a faint wash of sound came to our ears. Tiamat stood on her toes as if that added height would let her see what was taking place beyond the city walls. Mahthys was there, with our people and the caravan traders. A momentary fear beat in me. If there should be trouble and I were not at her side—

Tiamat laughed softly and leaned against me.

"The wandering traders make merry," she murmured. "Those are fireflames reflected in the sky. They've built a big bonfire and are dancing around it."

My corded muscles relaxed. Though it seemed I could hear the ring of iron on iron, the screams of women and the cries of men, I was not sure. I ought to go to the city gate, to make sure everything was safe, I told myself, and yet—where the woolen robe had opened I could see the jutting white globes of Tiamat's breasts, tipped by the dark nipples. My senses responded to that glimpse of her body and overpowered the caution of my mind.

I slipped a hand through the opening and caught the ripe weight of her breast in my palm. It was smooth as beaten cream, firm to the touch and heavy. She turned at my caress and smiled up at me, her longlashed eyes dark and promising in the night.

Her full mouth was a little open. My lips sought her lips, found them wet and eager as they parted. Under the woolen robe as she turned I could feel her body soft and warm, promising exquisite delights.

Her long fingernails, painted silver, came up to scratch my throat lightly even as her hips swayed at my loins. A whimper grew in her throat. We clung together and the feel and smell of her pampered body, fragrant with unguents and perfumes, was a memory out of my past. Just so had I stood with the painted noblewomen of Ilion before the city burned. As was Tiamat, so had been those forgotten women of my youth.

When she drew back a little the redness in the sky was dying out, the metallic sounds and the cries were gone. She turned, staring southward. "The feasting must be beginning," she murmured. With a bright smile, she looked again at me. "Which reminds me, our own supper will be ready by now."

My arm about her slim waist, we went back inside her living quarters. The girls were setting bowls of lamb seasoned with berry sauce on small serving tables. Beside them were platters of dates, figs and oranges, with sliced melons. I had not realized how hungry I was.

We sipped chilled wine, then ate, using our fingers as was the custom, wiping them from time to time on napkins hanging from the little tables.

As the meal progressed, I exchanged one hunger for another. I let my eyes roam the glimpsed nakedness of her upper body, marveling at her loveliness. Her eyelids were tinted. Her long red hair, falling down her back and across her shoulders, made a vivid frame for her exquisitely chiseled face.

From somewhere the girl musicians began to play very softly. I recognized the rhythm as an ancient chant to Cybele; it was one more memory of my past come to life. My hands went out to Tiamat, brought her against me. She put her arms about my middle and let her mouth seek blindly for my lips. There was a fire in her flesh which I could feel against me. Her fingers moved over my body gently, leaving matching flames in their wake. It was only then that I realized she was disrobing me.

My swordbelt was undone. My tunic had been untied, pushed up and off my chest. A hand touched me, then unfastened my cotton loincloth. Soft laughter and perfumed flesh surrounded me as this witchwoman moved with an enchanting grace, stroking and caressing me. Hers was the wisdom of all womankind. There were no facets of lovemaking between a man and woman that she did not know and practise.

Tiamat made me feel like the Rhodes colossus, two hundred feet tall. My strength was greater even than that of the bull of Crete. I made her wail and weep with pleasure as did the devotees of Dagon when they paid homage to the god. Lamplight flickered on the white, curving hips as they danced for our pleasure. Once the night covered us with blackness when a gust of wind off the Shephelah whipped through the city and into our bedchamber, but she rose and relit the oil boats, standing naked in their glow to let me see and admire her loveliness.

Then she ran back to me, laughing softly, and flung herself full length on my body. "You are no man, Trojan—but a

god!" she whispered, caressing me with her lips. "Stay in Gath. Together, you and I can own this city!"

In that instant, made godlike by her adoration, I knew she was right. Tiamat and I could rule Gath—she as its queen, I as its Tyrant—but this was not my destiny. Even as these thoughts came to me I had the added knowledge that this woman too, served her purpose in life, that the warp and woof of her days twisted and tangled here with mine in a larger but as yet unknown fate.

It was then that we heard the tramp of feet in the cobbled streets beyond the recessed window, the clank of a scabbard hitting a metal cuirass. These were the feet of trained soldiers hunting for someone. They marched and halted for the search, then moved on.

A part of me should have been alive to their presence, should have understood whom they hunted, and why. I had been too long a man of arms not to have realized almost instantly the danger which threatened both Samson and myself. We were alone in Gath, which was a Philistine city. The city gates were bolted to keep strangers out at night, but they served the added purpose of keeping us in. Someone might have become drunk on wine and the sight of the naked girls at the brothel tents, and wagged an overzealous tongue.

I could see only Tiamat.

All my senses were trapped by her gurgling laughter as she knelt above me brushing my skin with her perfumed flesh, rousing me to madness. The blood hammered in my veins, beat with exquisite pleasure in my brain. There was no city of Gath, no world beyond its walls, no Mahthys, Samson or Delilah. Only Tiamat was real, the soft skin of her loins, the eager demands of her quivering thighs.

With a hoarse cry I thrust myself at her.

Dawn found her stretched on her back, arms wide flung, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. I rolled off the low couch, stood up in the stream of morning sunlight pouring through the recessed window. I felt vital, alive. I had returned for just a little while to the days of my youth and those madnesses of the flesh that had been so important to me in those years. This room might have been a room in Troy, its perfumed woman a Trojan widow.

Sighing, I wound the cotton cloth about my loins. It was almost a symbolical act; by it, I was saying farewell to Tiamat and to my lost past. From this instant on, my eyes must be

turned ahead, never to the rear. What had been, must remain behind me. Only the present and the future must count for Kharnos who was of Ilion, long ago.

I ate a little fruit from a bowl in the outer room after I had dressed. I went out into the cool morning brilliance and across the courtyard to the chambers which were the living quarters of the woman Tamar.

Samson opened a wooden door to my knocking. He stood with a hand scratching his thick black hair and yawning. There was a sated look about him. Gone were his lusts, his desires. Instead he was a simple man once again, the Judge of his people, a wanderer.

He spoke no word to me, only grunting. We crossed to the entry door where a boy slave sat sleeping. Samson unbolted the door, gestured me out and closed the paneling behind him. We fell into step along the cobbled street and the slapping of my sandals made me remember the hunting soldiers of the night before.

"Did you hear them?" I asked the big Habiru.

"Not once. All I had ears for was Tamar's squeals of joy. How that woman can love. Why, would you believe it—"

He fell into a recital of her feats of the night and of his own prowess. There was no sly prurience about Samson. He was filled with simple enjoyments of simple hungers; he marveled at his good fortune and told me of it that I might marvel with him. I listened only vaguely, for I found myself remembering Tiamat.

We came to the square before the great bronze gates of Gath. Those gates should have been ajar; the farmers came early to the marketplace with fresh food. The gates were closed and bolted however, and a file of soldiers stood before them.

Samson chuckled in his chest. "They've heard something. The stupid Philistines have discovered that Samson is in town."

I stared at him. "And you're not worried?" Two against a city were odds too great for my liking, even with my sword in a belt on my shoulder and with Samson at my side.

"Yahweh walks beside us, Kharnos We are not alone."

I grunted. Yahweh might help Samson but He was no god of mine. Cybele had done a good enough job for me in Troy, I suppose; at least the goddess had got me out of that funeral pyre alive and in one piece. I only wished I had the faith in her that Samson had in Yahweh.

A captain stepped from the stone sentry hut. He stared at us a moment, then ducked back inside. Another man came to the hut door. In the morning brightness, he looked like Chrysax. I told myself this was nonsense. He held his head sideways at a sharp angle so that his jaw seemed to rest on his shoulder; a broken neck might do this to a man, I thought, and conjured up the memory of Chrysax struggling helplessly in Samson's arms.

The man with the wry neck shouted and pointed a finger. "It's them! Samson and the Trojan! Get them."

Any Philistine might have recognized the Habiru strongman, only Chrysax would be likely to know me. I let my swordbelt slide, caught the scabbard and yanked out the blade. Ah, well. It was a fine morning to die, to spill one's lifeblood on these cobblestones.

Samson had no thought of dying, however. He ran forward bellowing, swinging his arms. His huge hands caught a spear from an advancing soldier, ripped it free and used it as a flail, clearing a path to the huge bronze gates.

Chrysax stood in the doorway of the sentry hut, yelling excitedly. Now Samson was at the gate, was putting his hands on its twin handles and yanking. The doors swung outward. At that instant three soldiers leaped on his back. He shook himself, freeing their grips. His hands caught the edge of a bronze gate and his back bowed low.

I saw his tremendous muscles bulge, grow taut with strain. Slowly the gate hinges began to yield. I saw their long spikes pulling free of the wood in which they were set. I grew aware that my breath was caught in my throat. It seemed I could not breathe. Mother Cybele! Was this man human? The hinges snapped. The gate came free.

Samson caught it up, flung it in the faces of the Philistine soldiers charging for him. Its edge caught them flush in their faces. I saw teeth fly, blood splatter. Two skulls cracked open. Then the Habiru was lifting the other gate, swinging it back and forth.

"Run, Kharnos! Run, man—run!"

I leaped forward.

Chrysax was whirling, screaming, pointing at me. Samson might escape, his outcry said, but the Trojan was another matter. Men leaped for me, swords in their hands. I had to turn, to fight. Less than twenty feet away the broken gateway gaped, beckoning my feet; yet if I moved toward it, half a dozen swords would bloody their lengths in my back.

Iron rang on copper blades. My Bablyonian sword flashed in the early sunlight, parrying a stroke and thrusting, swinging in a circle of flashing brilliance One man was down with a raw red wound gaping where his arm had been, another was bent over coughing red bubbles from a swordblade in his belly.

I fought coolly, without fire. Not for me the heated exchanges of your untrained swordsman. An angry man is blind as well as clumsy. I backed slowly toward the opening in the city gateway.

Chrysax was screaming from the sentry hut.

In answer to those frenzied exhortations, three Gathites ran to get behind me. One I caught with the point of my blade right across the eyes. He screamed and dropped to his knees, hand covering his sightless eyes, but the others went where Chrysax told them.

Now I had Philistines before and behind me. I wondered where Samson was. The men around me were making so much noise I could no longer hear his bellows. I wondered if he had been taken prisoner.

Shields loomed on all sides. I saw swordblades lifted above them, turning in the air and coming for me with their flats. Chrysax wanted me alive, then. I ran my sword in an opening between two shield-rims, heard a man yell. Then the flat of a bronze sword caught me behind the head. Another fell across an arm, numbing it.

I went to a knee. Trying to clear my head, I shook it. I secured a fresh grip on the haft of my sword. The flats of two more blades drove at me. I was numb. Everything was turning black around me. I saw the cobblestones far below.

I tried to get back on my feet. I swung my iron sword, felt the jar as it struck shield rim and sword edge. I had no room to swing, then; shields were all about me, pressing close. It was like being smothered.

Too late I saw a swordblade above my head.

It hit hard, bouncing.

My knees buckled and I went down. A cobblestone—there was blood on it—bit into my cheek. My eyes were still open and I could hear, though I could not move a muscle. Hands caught me by the armpits, hoisted me to my feet. When my legs buckled, strong arms held me.

Vaguely I sensed Chrysax before me, head twisted onto his shoulder. The back of his hand caught my cheek, the force of his blow swinging my head around. He was foaming at the lips like a mad dog.

"So now, Trojan! You've come to the end of your rope. Ah, it won't be a kind end, either. A long death and a hard one, that's what Jubaal says. He's promised that I can wield some of the redhot pokers to your eyes."

"Samson?" I whispered through thickening lips.

His clenched fist struck me, knocked me senseless.

2.

I woke to the sense of movement. I was being carried along a road. My arms were bent behind me, then brought forward and tied by ropes taut across my chest. A lance butt had been wedged between my bent elbows. It was by that wooden shaft that two husky Philistines were carrying me, my feet dragging in the dirt, out of the shattered gateway of Gath toward the tents and rope corrals of the open air market beyond the city walls.

My muscles were on fire. My arms felt as if they were being wrenched from their sockets. A red mist floated before my eyes. In that mist I saw what looked like gaunt treeboles thrusting from the ground and draped with human bodies. I lifted my head, stared more closely.

My middle heaved. The Philistines had impaled my companions on the sharpened end of those slim treeboles—I saw Aaron writhing in agony, still alive, and dead Shaphan with his head hanging, legs and arms curiously limp. Beyond them was the young man named Caleb, and the others. The sharpened tips protruded upward from their backs, having been driven into their groins and through them.

The women were not there and my heart grew cold.

The caravan traders had withdrawn a good distance and stood on the side of a distant hill, watching. Not for them the struggles between Philistine and Habiru; they wanted no part of old feuds and killings. I cursed the folly that had involved me with Samson and his troubles. When the chance had been mine, I should have taken Mahthys and run southward into the wilderness or northward, skirting Phoenicia, to the land of the Hittites.

It was too late, now.

The men on either side of me dragged me forward toward an open stretch of ground. I saw a naked woman on her back with a dozen spears thrust through her belly, pinning her to the ground. Mahthys? Ah—was this Mahthys?

No. The hair of this woman was brown, not black.

Zilpah, then—who had hoped to marry Shaphan.

She had been raped to death or, if she was not dead when the Philistines wearied of her, helpless to move when they ran their bronze spearheads into her flesh.

Chrysax roared and a man came forward, dragging something that whimpered and tried to hide behind his crimson cloak. It was a woman, a woman with long, matted black hair and grimy face, with bloody scratches on the soft skin of her hips and thighs and breasts. She was naked. Her bare feet were filthy with dust. When she saw me she gave a great cry and ran forward, falling to her knees.

"Kharnos, Kharnos," she whispered, her eyes shining brightly. "I thought you dead. I doubted, I doubted."

My dry tongue ran over my lips. "Doubted what, Mahthys?"

"The wisdom of Yahweh. Why He selected us to do His bidding. Oh, but I don't doubt any more!"

Chrysax lunged forward. His fist caught her alongside her jaw and drove her sideways into the dust. "Egyptian whore!" he snarled. "Speak no more of—"

My feet came up. I almost screamed from the pain of my wrenched arms as I hung my weight on the spearshaft under my arms but I got my legs off the ground and drove them straight at Chrysax. I caught him in his groin with both sandalled feet.

He went down and flopped around on the ground, screaming.

The men beside me wrenched at the spearshaft, jerking me back. I thought for an agonized instant that they had dislocated my shoulderblades.

"Easy, easy," said a voice behind us. "I want him healthy."

Jubaal toed his horse forward. He was smiling coldly, running his eyes over me, then over the naked body of Mahthys where she lay huddled on the ground His handless arm was hidden by his purple cloak but his mashed nose was out in plain sight for all men to see. I was desperately glad at that moment that it had been my fist which had ruined his good looks.

"Healthy, he will take a long time to die," he said slowly, as if in explanation of his words. The men around us laughed. Jubaal glanced at Chrysax, beckoning two soldiers forward. "Help him. Ease his pain. I want Chrysax alive and well too —so he can direct the manner in which this Trojan shall die."

A foot kicked Mahthys to her feet. A hand pushed her toward me. She stumbled and almost fell but a brutish soldier

caught her by an arm, held her upright and made stand exposed like that for his companions to see. She was not a brazen wench and I knew how much it must have pained her to be shown like that for the pleasure of these Philistines.

As if he sensed my thoughts, Jubaal laughed at me. "Perhaps we will amuse ourselves with the girl first, before we kill the Trojan. It's an idea, eh, Gibbethon?"

I turned my head, saw a bearded man sitting a white horse. So this was the Tyrant of Gath, the man for whom Tamat was to dance at the state banquet this night. And Jubaal was the visiting prince to be honored. Gibbethon was a squat man but immensely powerful, to judge by the bulging muscles of his bared arms. He wore a golden circlet in his black hair and a purple cloak ornamented with golden threads over his white chiton.

Gibbethon laughed harshly. His little pig eyes glinted as they stared at Mahthys. Despite her grime, she was a beautiful girl. All she needed was a bath, a few unguents, to tempt even a royal Tyrant. Gibbethon sighed. "A waste, Jubaal. An utter waste."

Jubaal glanced at him sharply. "This is a private matter, Gibbethon. The man and the girl belong to me. It is a matter of vengeance."

Gibbethon smiled wryly and spread his hairy hands wide. "I merely comment, Jubaal. The girl is a pretty thing. It just seems too bad."

"So much the more will the man suffer."

The Tyrant nodded, smiling cruelly into his beard.

Jubaal waved an arm, shouting orders. We were to be taken to the palace prison and put on display before the multitudes. When his visit to Gath was ended, Mahthys and I would be taken back to Ashkelon for punishment. He had it neatly arranged, did Jubaal; I suppose something in him savored the sweetness of his vengeance, honeyed as it was by waiting. A spear butt prodded me into motion. A soldier pushed Mahthys into my path, made her walk before me. Ribald voices called on me to imagine her thighs locked around me in passion. It would never happen for me again, they assured me. All I had was the memory of past pleasure to reflect on—and the hint of future pain.

Samson had escaped. I knew that much, at least. Jubaal would have made a greater triumph out of capturing him. As it was, he walked his horse through the streets of Gath slowly as might a warrior king come home from some great battle,

showing me off to the people crowding the cobblestones and the flat rooftops.

I endured the insults and the refuse they flung at me as long as I could. Then I lifted my head and roared at them.

"Is this the best a Philistine prince can do—capture one man and one girl? Is it so great a feat of Philistine arms to overcome one lone man with fifty? Pah! You sicken me, you and your pretensions! Where is Samson? Where is the Habiru strongman, people of Gath? Him you could not make prisoner —not with ten times the fifty men you needed to defeat me."

My laughter rang out hoarse and mocking until Jubaal made a sign to one of the soldiers who struck me over the head with the flat of his sword.

3.

I woke on the rotting straw of a dungeon cell.

Heavy bronze manacles held my wrists and ankles. Through small grilled windows I could see stars in the night sky and hear the sound of music and revelry from the palace overhead. Tiamat would be dancing there for the pleasure of Jubaal and the Tyrant of Gath. I wondered if either of them would have her body after the dancing as I had enjoyed it last night.

I cursed my flesh that had yielded to the wiles of the Gathite woman. I beat my manacles together in despair. I did not want to die in agony and screaming my lungs out for the pleasure of the prince of Ashkelon. I was still young, enamored of life and its pleasures.

I covered my face with my hands and sank back against the damp stone wall of my prison. I whispered to Cybele, asking her help. The thought came to me that I prayed to nothing more than a statue, a thing of cedar and ebony and ivory bedecked with jewels. The great statue of Cybele that had towered tall in her Temple close by the Megaron in Ilion was only an inanimate image, without life, without true godhood.

Ah, and Yahweh? Was He any more a deity than Cybele?

I am no philosopher. I knew little about gods and the nature of gods. It seemed to me, however, that a true god would comfort his or her worshipper in time of trouble. Or was this asking too much?

I stretched out on the straw, hands clasped behind my head. I tried to think, to ignore the pain of wrenched muscles and untended wounds. After a while I slept.

Or—did I sleep?

My body lay in the stinking straw and my eyes were closed. Yet it seemed that suddenly my eyelids became translucent and I could see the cold dark cell lighted by starlight pouring through its grilled window. There was no sound of laughter and music from above. The world was silent.

Then slowly, the starlight became brighter.

It was as if something moved in that silver radiance, something that pulsed and shimmered, waxed bright with a cold luminescence. Something that was—alive, sentient. I held my breath as the brightness grew and grew.

Yahweh!

I knew it instinctively, yet I heard a voice, deep and resonant, not with my ears, as I would hear the words of men but with some corner of my mind. I lay motionless and saw the cold silver light and heard the voice, and in my mind I did obeisance to His godhood.

I am the Lord thy God, Kharnos, as I am the Lord God of Judah. It was My breath that formed life in your clay, Mine the will that brought you safe from burning Troy to fulfill your destiny in Judah and in Ashkelon. Know this, and be at rest. For your part you shall be rewarded with that which you want most in life.

The voice died out.

The silver light went away.

I slumbered soundly.

When I woke I thought back on my dream, if it was a dream and not reality. Had the God of the Habiru, this Yahweh, really come and spoken to me? Or had my overwrought senses conjured Him up from some twisted, frightened corner of my brain? I did not know, nor do I know now the truth of what took place in the dungeon in Gath.

This I do know: that a strange peace had come into me. I no longer feared the threats of Jubaal, prince of Ashkelon. When the jailer came in the morning to unlock my manacles and bring me out into the sunlight, I walked straight and proud to the chariot to which I was to be chained.

In chains and swallowing the dust of those chariot wheels, I came once again to Ashkelon. Mahthys walked beside me, stumbling often. When she would have fallen I put my arm about her and supported her until her strength returned. At night she crept into my arms weeping, for she feared death—more especially the painful death Jubaal had promised her

so that it would hurt me more—and there was little I could do to comfort her.

The people on the wall walks cheered Jubaal on his black horse, waving colored scarfs and shouting his name. But when we had passed, they because curiously silent. Looking back I saw that soldiers had mingled with the crowd and here and there a few had used their fists and the butt ends of their lances to open mouths and loosen tongues.

Jubaal was not as popular at home as he wanted it thought. I saw him turn and wait for the parade to move beyond him; then he walked his mount toward me. He was smiling but there was a cold madness in his eyes.

"First you go before Shepthazzah, Trojan. Then—to the torturers!"

Chains clanked beside me. Mahthys had fainted.

BOOK THREE: The Book of Delilah

EIGHT

The torture dungeons of Jubaal

The throne room of the palace of Ashkelon was long and wide. Mighty red pillars flanked its walls which were covered by magnificent brocade curtains dyed Tyrian purple and heavily tasseled with red-gold wires. The floor was tiled to represent strange sea monsters and the god Dagon overcoming them, for the Philistines had been a sea people before they settled along this coastal strip, and all their legends had to do with the ocean. A dozen steps, overlaid with rich purple carpeting, led up to the golden throne where Shepthazzah held court.

He rested his elbows on the throne arms as he watched me approach. A thin golden circlet gleamed in his black hair. From an ebony and gold tripod a thin plume of incense curled upward to the high ceiling while close to his right hand stood a golden table holding several scrolls. Four marble columns supported a marble canopy high above his head.

Ranged behind him were his counsellors, old men all of them, and the woman called Delilah. My eyes touched her last of all, though I think a part of me had seen her as we came through the great bronze doors. She was wearing a transparent tunic, with many rings and bracelets on her fingers and arms. A great tiara rose upward from her carefully coiffured hair. She was staring at me with wide eyes, her mouth a little open. I could not understand her strange expression.

A guards captain signalled us to halt. Mahthys was trembling so much her heavy chains gave off a faint clanking sound. From beside us, Jubaal swaggered forward.

"I brought back the Trojan," he said, not so much to his father the king as to the people crowding the throne room. "I went to Gath seeking him. Here he is."

The rich merchants and noblemen murmured, then were

still. Shepthazzah had been staring hard at his son, face flushed and eyes bright. His right hand, extended on the heavy arm of the throne, was bunched into a big fist. It seemed to me that his thick lips were sneering.

Jubaal cried, "I ask the privilege of his death!"

Shepthazzah bit his lip. His eyes moved this way and that in the throne room, as if he sought for help. Perhaps he did not want to risk an outright break in relations between his son and himself, yet at the same time he would welcome any suggestion that would permit him to exercise his own power and authority.

Remembering my strange dreams, I said aloud, "What great feat has Jubaal done that he should usurp the right of the Tyrant himself?"

The prince gasped and whirled, hand uplifted to strike. I think at that moment he would have foregone any pleasure at my torture to kill me with his bare hands.

"Hold!" rasped Shepthazzah. "Let the prisoner speak."

He was smiling oddly, hunched forward on the edge of his golden throne. Black eyes bored into mine. I did not look at Jubaal but kept my attention solely on Shepthazzah. Beside me, Jubaal panted harshly but let his arm fall to his side; evidently he did not yet dare challenge the kingship of his father.

"What great deed has Jubaal done?" I asked. "He attacked with all his force and with all the forces of Gath—six Habiru men and two of their women. The men he killed by impalement, the women his men raped. When this brave deed was done, his men saw me and my companion and charged into us. Fifty men against two.

"Is this Philistine bravery? Is this how the sea rovers—your ancestors—won this land? Me alone they captured. My companion escaped."

Shepthazzah said drily, "I know nothing of any companion. It was not told to me."

"My companion tore loose the bronze gates of Gath. In his bare hands he wielded one—slaying right and left as he walked away to freedom. Neither brave Jubaal nor the Tyrant of Gath and all his fighting men could stop him."

A cold wind moved through the throne room. I saw Delilah shiver, and the king's counsellors move closer together. Shepthazzah licked his lips.

"This must be a mighty man, this companion of yours. How is he named?"

It was then that Jubaal struck me full on the side of the face so that I was driven off balance and went to the floor with my chains clashing about me. I lay half stunned; Jubaal was a strong youth, I give him that; my jaw would be swollen for a few days as a result of his blow, if I lived so long.

To my surprise, I heard voices crying out against the prince. A few bold men had found the courage to speak their minds and others, so encouraged, joined in the chorus. Jubaal looked around him, startled. He was realist enough to know the temper of angry men. His act had been an affront to the king and to the dignity of his court. He understood suddenly that he had gone too far.

I got to my feet. I said aloud, "Forgive Jubaal. He is a frightened man, and frightened men do many things a brave man would scorn to do."

Jubaal's eyes bulged as he stared at me.

"He is afraid of me, who broke his nose and cut off his hand in fair fight but he is even more afraid of my companion. A hundred men he must have had, counting the soldiers of Gath —but Samson fought his way through them."

"Samson," whispered the king.

"Samson," breathed the noblemen and merchants.

Fear was alive in all of them at that moment. It was a superstitious dread for which I could hardly blame them. Their blanched faces turned this way and that as if seeking escape.

In the face of their fright, Jubaal recovered his courage.

"At least let me kill his companion," he shouted.

"You will never kill me, Jubaal," I said to him in a low voice amid the voices of the others crying out. "I think you know that, deep inside yourself. It is this knowledge that drives you half mad with rage."

"Trojan swine!" he hissed. "Right now, at this moment—"

His hand caught at his swordhilt. In the next instant he would have drawn his blade and spitted me. I lifted my arms and shook my chains so that their loud clanking drowned out everything else.

"Only one thing can ever capture Samson," I shouted.

A hush fell over the throne room. Shepthazzah was crouched on the edge of his throne, tensely leaning. Delilah held a clenched fist to her trembling bosom. Even Jubaal scarcely breathed.

"What is this thing, Trojan?" whispered Shepthazzah.

I drew a deep breath. Though it went against all my training, all the years of my life, some force greater than my will

held sway over my tongue. I tried to fight it, not wanting to betray my comrade in arms.

"What is it?" shouted the king, hitting his throne arm.

Speak, man of Ilion! Speak as Yahweh commands!

Was that the voice of a God I heard within me, summoning me to action? Or was it only my imagination, seeking to excuse me from the guilt of betrayal? I could only speak as the force was making me.

"A woman," I said. "Only a woman can capture Samson."

Shepthazzah let out his breath with a wry smile. "What nonsense is this you prate? A woman, indeed! When the strongest men have failed? When you yourself betrayed the thrust I had in you? A woman—bah!"

I looked at Delilah and I thought there were tears in her eyes. It was as if she too had dreamed a dream, a prophetic nightmare in which she had been privileged to see her future. Now this dream was coming to life around her.

"It is true," she said clearly. "Only in such a manner may the Habiru be overcome. The goddess herself has told me in a vision."

Jubaal snorted but he remained silent. Shepthazzah beat with his palm on the golden throne arm, steadily and monotonously. The people all stared up at him, awaiting his decision.

"Samson has a weakness for foreign women," I said slowly. "There is an animality in him, a compulsion which draws him toward women other than those of the Habiru. Every so often he must consort with them. He will go to any lengths to do so. He had been with a woman of Gath the night before Jubaal and Gibbethon tried to capture him."

I felt Mahthys turn and look at me. Some instinct which all women possess concerning the man they love, must have moved in her then. She held her breath and waited.

Delilah was looking at her and smiling spitefully. "What of you, Kharnos? You were in the city with Samson. Did you also take a foreign woman to bed?"

"I took the woman called Tiamat," I replied.

Delilah laughed, still watching Mahthys. Her laughter sent a stab of fury through my veins. I shouted out, "Why should not the loveliest of the women of Philistia try her hand at capturing the strongest man among the Habiru?"

I could have bitten off my tongue after I had spoken. Already I had played traitor to the man with whom I had sworn blood brotherhood. Now in my bitterness I was betraying the woman I loved.

Aie, against all sanity, I loved Delilah. As I looked up into her longlashed eyes, as I fed my eyes on the oval of her flushed face, her long copper hair, on the beauty of her body faintly seen beneath the thin byssus of her tunic, I admitted to myself that I loved her more than a dying man loves life, more than a thirsty man loves water. She was an unattainable vision in my sight, as is the mirage to a man wandering on the desert, as is the hope of wealth and honor to the leper in his banishment.

Mahthys and Tiamat were no more than women to me, assuagements to the fevers of lust that burned at times in my loins. Delilah was that too, but she was more than mere flesh in my eyes. She was a magical enchantment.

And I was destroying her.

If she set out to entrap Samson, she would never be made queen of Ashkelon. Shepthazzah could not take as his consort a woman who had lain with an Habiru; it was a tenet of their religion. She would be no more than a temple harlot. She might even lose her position as high priestess.

The throne room was silent. Beside me, Jubaal was breathing heavily, muttering into his teeth. I cursed my tongue that had placed Delilah within reach of his hands If he feared to take her because she would be the future queen of Ashkelon, he would have no compunctions about putting his hands on a temple woman.

Shepthazzah lifted his head slowly. He stared down at me and at his son. Then he turned his head and looked at Delilah.

"So be it," he nodded, and rose to his feet.

There was only one sound in the room now.

Jubaal was laughing harshly, with his head thrown back.

I wanted to kill him, but I was given no opportunity to do more than think about it. The soldiers on either side of me held tight my chains, holding me motionless as Shepthazzah, gathering his ornate robe about him, moved from the dais and under a low-hanging drape into another part of the palace.

Delilah stood frozen, staring down at me.

Jubaal made a gesture. The soldier on my left tugged my chains as the other pushed me around. I walked from the throne room with those big bronze links clanking musically at every stride. I could hear Mahthys, walking behind me, weeping softly to herself.

We came out onto the broad areaway before the palace into blinding sunlight. A great crowd had gathered in the square. At sight of us in our chains they fell silent, staring.

Jubaal was at my elbow, smiling grimly. "Today you die, Trojan. You and this wench of yours. Before you die, I want to thank you for giving Delilah to me."

His hand gestured. Armed men wearing his horned device came from a corner of the portico. They shouldered the royal guards aside, gripped my chains in their hands. The captain of the guards was helpless. He protested but the prince of Ashkelon pushed him away and moved down the palace steps to the great square bordered by the avenue of the thousand pillars. His cloak swayed to his arrogant stride. Men gave way before him as do waves before the prow of a ship.

The manacles cut into my wrists as I was dragged after him. Like a beast of burden I was tugged along through the streets toward a smaller palace that was the home of Jubaal. Sweat stood out in thick beads on my forehead. I knew where I was being taken, and why.

There would be dungeons beneath his palace with thick stone walls to blot out the screams of the men and possibly the women he would be torturing to death. In those damp subterranean rooms I, Kharnos of Ilion, would end my days in a red mist of agony. I only hoped I would have the strength not to beg for mercy.

Mahthys was sobbing fitfully behind me. She too would die in torment. I would be made to watch it before the skinning knives cut into my own flesh. Nausea made a churning in my middle. I did not remember the dream of Yahweh now. All I could think of was the fate that lay in wait for us.

We were taken by way of a narrow corridor into the palace and then down a ramp which led to a series of underground chambers, barred and ominous. I could make out a man moaning somewhere in the darkness.

Torches made redness in a large cell fitted out with wooden instruments of torture. I could see a rack and beyond that a huge wheel with spokes and a pulley attachment. There were other engines here, half hidden in the shadows but I had no time to study them as I was thrown against a stone wall, my arms lifted upward and stretched wide apart. More manacles were fitted over my wrists and clamped shut. I hung spread-eagled, my toes barely able to touch the damp stone floor.

Now they brought Mahthys forward. A smith unlocked her manacles even as two soldiers caught her tunic and ripped it from her shoulders and down her front. Her breasts exploded into view, naked and trembling. She cried out harshly as her solitary garment was torn from her. Then she was caught up in

half a dozen hands and carried toward a huge wooden wheel.

They strapped her down so that the wood was against her bare back and her wrists and ankles were roped to great wooden spokes. She was absolutely helpless, unable to move a muscle. Jubaal came forward and ran his palm along her thigh. When she cried out, he chuckled lewdly.

"A fiery tidbit, this one. Too bad she has to die so painfully. She might make a better decoration for my bedchamber than my torture chamber. Blame Kharnos for what's about to happen, my dear."

A man came forward at Jubaal's signal. In one hand he carried a knout, the thongs of which were knotted at regular intervals. Each knot held a thin sliver of sharpened metal. She screamed when his hand raised it before her distended eyes.

"No!" I bellowed, shaking my chains. "Let her go, Jubaal. What manner of man are you that you can do this to a woman?"

"A man who hates you, Trojan."

He seated himself in a highbacked chair and gave the signal to commence. The torturer lifted the knout, brought it down hard across her tender thighs. I saw skin rip and blood spatter. Mahthys screamed, a steady ululation of sound that filled the big stone room. Again the knout lifted, again it fell.

I nearly went mad, trying to get free, to stop this flogging. I knew well enough what was in Jubaal's twisted mind. First the thighs, then the belly, then the soft breasts would be ripped apart and shredded by those cruel thongs. Mahthys would die slowly in exquisite agony under that lash. But not for several hours.

And I must hang in my chains and watch it.

The knout lifted high into the air.

2.

A man was pouring water over Mahthys to revive her when we heard the sounds. A sword clanged on metal and a man cried out. Jubaal came off his chair, turning toward the ramp which led to the upper floors, his hand opening and closing.

Someone was bellowing from the top of the ramp.

"Jubaal, you fool! If you've harmed the man I'll have you flayed alive!"

The Tyrant of Ashkelon stood spraddle-legged in the shadows, mailed men on either side of him gripping torches. To his right I made out a veiled woman I knew to be Delilah.

Slowly Shepthazzah came down the ramp, walking with his bull stride, his shoulders faintly swinging.

His eyes saw me at once and relief touched his features but he never broke step, only moved straight to his son and hit him hard across the face with the back of a hairy hand. He was breathing harshly and for a moment he seemed about to draw his dagger and plunge it to the hilt in Jubaal's chest.

Recovering his temper he stood back and let his soldiers move into the room. One of them ripped the knout from the hand of the torturer and threw it against the stone wall. Two others came and removing a keyring from the belt of a second man, unlocked my manacles.

Shepthazzah was standing beside Mahthys, ordering her release. I came up beside him; asked, "Will she live?"

The Tyrant stared past me at his son. "If she does not, Jubaal will answer with his life." Anger tinted his face dull red. I saw the veins in his forehead stand out like blue worms. "Fool!" he exploded. "Must you force me to kill you? Is that what you want?

"Don't think I'm not aware of what you think you're doing behind my back—visiting my fellow Tyrants in Gath and Ashdod and Ekron! Trying to win alliances for yourself. Against me! How can you be so stupid? Do you think Gibbethon will come to your aid if you rebel? Why should he put any trust in you? If you'd take up arms against your own father, how could he feel secure on his throne with you as a neighbor?

"And the others—Rhattinatus in Ekon, Shubagal in Ashdod? Each of them has sent secret messages warning against you, advising that you plot against me."

Shepthazzah began to laugh, bitterly and with mockery. "Pull your teeth, they tell me. Me, your own father. Aye, by Baal! I'll pull your teeth, you young whelp! I'll banish you from my kingdom. I'll disperse your little army of followers. I'll give them a choice: death—or loyalty to Shepthazzah! Until I send for you, remain in your palace. My men will patrol the streets outside it.

"Attempt to leave and I'll have you put in chains in your own dungeon!" He stalked to the ramp, waving the terrified executioners ahead, leaving only Jubaal standing in the shadows. He turned and looked back.

"Don't you understand why we must keep the Trojan alive? How else can we lure Samson into Delilah's clutches? And the girl! She's our only hold over him. Samson must die so that

Philistia can be free to conquer Judah. To accomplish that, I would do anything. Understand me, Jubaal—anything!"

There was death in the eyes of the Tyrant as he stared at his son. Then he whirled on a heel and moved up the ramp. I went with him, holding an unconscious Mahthys in my arms.

Delilah walked beside me, pity on her face.

"My own physician will care for her, Kharnos. This I promise."

I glanced at her profile. "Even after what I said in the throne room? About the most beautiful woman in Ashkelon catching the strongest man in Judah?"

Her full mouth made a bitter smile. "Once we talked about destiny, you and I, and you said that if our fate is joined with that of Samson, neither of us can do anything about it. We must put our feet on paths known only to the gods and trust in ourselves not to stumble."

Mahthys sighed and nestled her head to my chest.

3.

The night air was cool on the stone balcony of the Temple that looked out over the rooftops of the city of Ashkelon and the harbor waters glimmering by moonlight. I stood with my hands clenched on its rail, relieved that I was alive, glad that Mahthys too would live.

Less than an hour after the evening meal, Subratti the physician had visited me and had taken me with him to a large, airy room where Mahthys lay covered with a woolen blanket. Her hair had been curled and scented and there was green tinting on her eyelids and red paste on her full red mouth. She was smiling as I knelt beside her, catching her hands and kissing them.

"You're better?" I asked.

"Subratti put salve on my wounds that eased their pain," she nodded, fingers clenched tight on my hands. "He tells me there will be scars—a few only—on my thighs. None on any other part of me, though."

"Bless Shepthazzah for that, at least," I growled.

She put her fingertips on my lips and ran them back and forth. Her face was clouded, her eyes worried. "Delilah came to see me. She told me you must bring Samson to her. I'm to be kept here as a hostage."

"I know."

Her head went back and forth on the pillow. "I don't know

what to say, what to think. It's terrible to betray Samson, even to think of doing it. And yet—it's his life or ours. Delilah promised that if you bring Samson to her, you and I are free to go where we will."

I nodded heavily. I knew the terms, or could guess at them. Neither Shepthazzah nor Delilah had any interest in me other than as bait with which to spring their trap for the Habiru strongman. Once that was done, once they had their hands on Samson, I was free to roam the world. Only Jubaal hated me, and Jubaal was a prisoner in his own palace.

Subratti touched my shoulder after a while as a signal that I must let Mahthys sleep. I nodded and, leaning over, kissed her forehead. She gave a little smile and pouted a kiss up at me.

Now I stared at the stars and the harbor waters, and remembered another night here in the Temple before I had gone on my quest after Samson. I had broken Jubaal's nose that night, as well as taken Delilah in my arms for the first and only time in my life. I had never known any other woman like her; there had been a slow fire in her flesh and a deep hunger in her heart, and for a little while she made me feel that I alone could feed them both.

A footfall sounded on the balcony floor. I turned, studying the woman who came walking from the shadows. Her long tunic was like mist but she wore a red and gold cloak about her shoulders and long copper hair hung down about her shoulders. It was Delilah. She looked like a wife come to join her husband for a breath of air before going in to bed.

She smiled when I said something of this and leaned her weight on the rail beside me. I fancied her smile was wistful. "I would be happy just to be a wife with a husband, some simple man with no ambition."

I laughed harshly, torn between bitterness and amusement. She turned her head and her glowing eyes seemed to eat at me. "I mean what I say, Kharnos. Oh, I know this will never happen. I want too much to be queen in Ashkelon, or—failing that—to be high priestess, to give up all this. In me, ambition is ever at war with happiness."

"They are not the same," I admitted.

"I spoke only of my happiness when I said I wanted to be a wife. All I would have to do then is keep my man well fed, warmly clothed, and amply loved." Laughter lay deep in her eyes as she considered my glum face. More softly she spoke, so that it seemed she merely whispered. "Too bad you aren't

a rich man, with a fortune hidden away somewhere. It would not have to be a very big fortune—just enough to keep me in clothes and a few luxuries the rest of my days."

"Would you run away with me, then?"

She turned a jewelled bracelet on her wrist, studying the sparkle of torchlight on its faceted surface. "I might. Oh, Kharnos—I might do that." For the moment, she was neither priestess nor future queen but only a troubled woman.

I put my hands to her shoulders, drew her to me. Her eyes were open wide, startled, a little fearful, but her loins were soft to mine. She was a woman, I was a man, in this moment out of Time; everything else was forgotten. It was as if she had been as lonely among many as I had been, as though a part of her yearned for something else, some better thing than queenship.

Her lips were moist, yielding, her arms strong as they held me to her. My palms stroked her smooth flesh through the thin linen of her garments, gently and with a kind of reverence.

She made a sound deep in her throat as she urged herself even closer, holding me tightly. Delilah and I had known bodily passion; this was something more, something finer, being a matter of the spirit or *ka*, as the Egyptians name it. When she withdrew her lips she put her flushed cheek to mine with a tenderness that made me swallow hard.

"This is a dream," I growled against my own emotion.

She may have smiled, but all I felt was the pinch of her forefinger and thumb on my neck. "Unfeeling beast! Don't you think I know how much you love me? It comes leaping out of your eyes every time you so much as look at me. Even that first day—do you remember? When I gave you your choice to be Baal or kill Samson?"

"I didn't know it showed."

"Oh, yes. Quite plainly." She let me see her laughing eyes. "For the first time in my life, it made me think. I wondered if I was doing what I wanted to do, plotting to be queen of Ashkelon."

"And have you decided?"

A crazy dream was coming to full flower in my veins. Delilah and I would steal away in the night, take passage on a boat plying the trade lanes to Egypt or one of the islands in the Aegean Sea or perhaps as far as that new Phoenician colony called Carthage. We could be gone within the hour. All we needed was my sword and a few jewels in a knotted cloth.

She slid from my arms, leaving them cold and empty.

"I have decided, Kharnos whom I love. My ambition is stronger than my yearning for happiness I will stay on. I will catch Samson for Shepthazzah if I can. You will go away with your little Egyptian girl, Mahthys—I felt very flattered when I saw how much she resembles me—and raise your children at a safe distance from Ashkelon and all it stands for."

"Now by the paps of Cybele! I won't—"

Her palm covered my mouth. An infinite tenderness swam in her dark eyes, brimming in tears as they were behind her long copper lashes. Her ripe red fruit of a mouth pursed to kiss the corner of my jaw.

"It is all written down on the marble steles where the gods tell of the lives and hopes of men before they break them and throw them into nothingness to write newer, fresher ones. Graven in stone, unchangeable. We are bound to do all that is set there, Kharnos—no matter how we feel about it."

"A man can change his destiny."

"No, he cannot. Your destiny is to bring Samson to me, mine is to see that he is captured. The gods have already chiseled out the letters which tell of it."

"And after that?"

"After that, Ashkelon and Shepthazzah. Shepthazzah will marry me, I think, despite what I am forced to do to capture the Habiru. He wants me very much. I have never given my body to him as I gave it to you one night here in this temple."

"I've dreamed of that night often enough."

"You too?" she murmured and let me kiss her breathless before she pushed me away. "Kharnos, listen! This love can only come in the dreams that Ashtaroth sends. We may never enjoy its reality. Please try to understand."

I shook my head. My tongue seemed stuck against the roof of my mouth so that I could not speak. My fingers opened and closed, helpless.

"I came to give you your orders. When I saw you standing alone I think my heart grew tired of dreams." As I reached for her she slid away, protesting. "No, no. You must listen. I—I am to sit in conference with Shepthazzah, to make final arrangements. Right now I am to tell you what to do. So please—listen carefully."

When she was done, she wept a little, so I knew that it had been Shepthazzah and his counsellors and not Delilah who had contrived at the destruction of my friend Samson. My part in the plan was to bring him to a villa in the valley of Sorek.

After that I was free to go where I would, with or without Mahthys.

All I had to do then was live with myself.

"Will you come back after seeing the Tyrant?" I asked her as she moved across the balcony to its door. She turned and shook her head at me.

"It is better to part this way. Perhaps—perhaps this is the last we will see of one another. Once Samson comes to the villa you'll have no reason to remain."

I watched her move away like a man seeing life slip through his fingers. Already I felt dead inside me, a wooden thing like those toys men carve to bury with their dead kings and pharaohs to serve them in the after-life.

4.

Helios the sun was high in the noonday sky as I toed my horse across a stretch of grasslands toward the hills of Etam where they rose dun-colored into the sky. My iron sword was belted to my middle and my garments were freshly cleaned and sewn. It had been thought wiser to send me back to Samson as I had been when he last saw me, lest suspicion be aroused. Shepthazzah was a far-sighted man. He knew the devious twists of a man's mind and the suspicion which lurks beneath the surface.

I found myself troubled by that same fear. Would the Habiru strongman believe me? Would a man like Aaron, for instance, have swallowed the tale I had been instructed to tell? If they thought I lied they would stake me naked on the plain and let the hot sun bake me alive.

In a way, I did not much care what they did. My body was empty of all feeling now that I knew Delilah loved me but that I could never have her. Before she had been only a tantalizing dream; now she was a reality which would always elude me; I felt the sufferings of Tantalus chained to his rock were small compared to mine.

I rode in a pall of black gloom. Even the sight of sheep grazing on a hillside, the plunge of a brook over its stones, the white clouds blowing across a blue sky—things in which I once had taken a simple, sensuous pleasure—had no power to raise my spirits. This time I need lift no weapon against Samson. I need only lure him with talk of foreign women. Against such bait the big man had no defence.

It is none so far from Ashkelon to the cliffs of Etam that a

horse at the gallop could not make it in full day. I rode at a leisurely pace, however, so that it was close to dusk when I saw a dust cloud roiling upward from the ground. Only a large body of men could make such a haze.

I drew rein while I studied the dust.

Gradually shapes took form. I saw asses drawing chariots and men standing in the wheeled vehicles and my heart gave a great lurch. There were my Habiru warriors, the men I had trained to use the chariot as a weapon, to hurl spears and arrows from their floorboards. I lifted my arm and waved it. I shouted and toed my horse to the gallop.

My eyes picked out Samson where he towered above the others. When he recognized me he gave a bellow and sprang from his chariot and came toward me at a run. I leaped from my horse and went to meet him.

He swung me off my feet. "Kharnos! You're alive. Unharmed. We were coming to rescue you, the men and I!"

"You idiots! Did you plan to put Ashkelon to siege?"

"One way or another we'd have rescued or avenged you! Tell me what happened. Mahthys? Where is she?"

I had to lie, now. I must convince Samson and the Habiru who crowded around me, shouting and clapping my shoulder with their hard hands, that I was no traitor come among them but an old friend with an incredible bit of luck.

"Mahthys is dead. Or so I was told," I began.

I spoke the truth about what befell the girl and myself until the moment when Shepthazzah appeared and freed me. "He cared little about me. It was his son he wanted to flout. Samson, you remember how it was Jubaal who caught us in Gath?"

Samson nodded, glowering. "Aye, Jubaal and the Tyrant, Gibbethon."

"Jubaal was in Gath plotting against his father, with Gibbethon. Somehow Shepthazzah got wind of it, learned what had happened and came himself to rescue me. I suppose he made the gesture not so much to save me as to show Jubaal who reigned in Ashkelon."

It was not much of a lie I told, at that. I could see belief shining in the eyes of the men around me and was heartened. At least there were no shouts of outraged denial, of accusation; as I saw Samson beaming at me and felt his hand patting my shoulder in delight, I wished there had been. It would not have taken me long to die under the hot Canaanite sun; this way, I would have to live in the knowledge that I was betraying my best friend to his enemies.

"They even invited me to a feast, some kind of religious celebration," I went on. "I suppose the Tyrant knew that word of his favor to me would get back to his son. Jubaal is under arrest in Ashkelon right now."

"Yes," said a bearded man suddenly. "I saw the soldiers standing outside his garden wall only yesterday."

At my startled look, Samson smiled slowly. "Nahum was visiting a relation in Ashkelon recently. I sent him there to learn what had happened to you. When he heard nothing, he returned. We were on our way to find out for ourselves."

It was confirmation of my lie, which hewed so closely to the truth. I spoke more confidently of the temple priestesses and their conduct at the religious celebration. The Habiru men were interested in hearing about the love rites of foreign women even though they were forbidden to consort with them. I spoke of certain lewd dances which are done in honor of Ashtaroth and of sterile caresses with which these temple women do honor to their goddess.

"You seem to have had a good time out of it," one man grumbled, thinking no doubt of the hot ride across the plain he had made in the chariot, coming to rescue me.

"Except for Mahthys dying, I did," I nodded. "But I have the feud between Shepthazzah and his son to thank for that. Had they been at all friendly, the skin would have been flayed off me by this time and I'd be dead."

They seemed satisfied, breaking into little groups and going to their chariots. Samson drew me by a big hand with him, pushing his driver into another vehicle, saying that Kharnos would steer for him. There was a tiny scowl on his forehead that he tried his best not to let the others see. There was something about my tale that puzzled the big man, but he wanted to keep it between the two of us

Accordingly, I took a position on the flank of the chariot line, driving slowly so that the others were soon ahead of us and hidden by the billowing dust which exploded from beneath their chariot wheels. I handled the reins with ease, trying not to reveal my worriment, turning my face away from Samson often as if to check the rope by which my horse was tied to the chariot railing.

When we were on our way about half an hour, Samson touched me with his hand. He said quietly, "Your story might fool the others, Kharnos—but not me. Speak the truth."

I said, perhaps too hurriedly, "I told the truth. Shepthazzah has put his son under arrest. He keeps him in his palace. He

saved me to spite Jubaal. I swear on the paps of Cybele this is truth."

"So far, I believe you. But once Shepthazzah sent you to kill me, which is something the other men don't know. You and I know this, and that the Tyrant of Ashkelon vowed your death if you failed in your mission."

My muscles tensed. Samson was a simple man, but he saw to the heart of things, perhaps because his eyes were not blinded by externals.

"That is true." I nodded. "Shepthazzah sent four men to watch me, to kill me if I failed. We destroyed them. Once the Tyrant had his hands on me he would kill me himself. This is the way you reason. And it makes sense, except for one thing. Shepthazzah hates his son more than he hates me. Or, possibly—even you.

"Jubaal is a snake in his own house. You are a lion prowling in the hills beyond it. Say yourself, Samson—which of those two would you fear more?"

"A snake, I suppose," he growled.

His eyes were far away, staring blindly at the cliffs of Etam which we could see as purple humps against the sky rapidly growing larger. It was as if his gaze were turned inward to some corner of his spirit by which he judged me.

"First he must remove the snake that threatens him," I argued. "And as he does so, he must commit no act which will show his fear of the snake or strengthen it against him. If he killed me for not having killed you, who would believe him? His people would say that he killed me to placate his son whom he fears."

Samson nodded slowly. "The people of Ashkelon might say that, yes. I can understand such reasoning."

We rode along for about a thousand cubits without speaking. Then I cleared my throat and said, almost apologetically, "There was a girl involved, too. One of Delilah's temple priestesses named Alatta. A Hittite."

"Delilah? She's the high priestess, isn't she?"

"The most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and I've looked on Helen of Sparta whom Paris stole from Menelaus. Helen was gold. Delilah is warm bronze."

Interest made Samson draw a deep breath. "Beautiful, you say?"

"As a storm sweeping over the vale of Ajalon. As a red sunset above the cliffs of Etam. Sultry. Warm. Dusky with prom-

ise." I spoke from my heart, for to me Delilah was all of these things and more.

I gave a little laugh. "Delilah is traveling to the valley of Sorek soon, to a pleasure palace. I would like to bed her again —but she gives herself only once to any man. I'll settle for the Hittite woman."

"Once only?" he muttered.

"What? Oh, yes. She made a vow to Ashtaroth to sample many men in her lifetime, not to take any of them a second time unless her heart itself is involved." I spoke casually as if it were of no moment to me, but I could tell the big Habiru was fascinated. He had heard of fair Helen of Troy whom all men called beautiful. If Delilah were more lovely, he would want very much to see her.

The chariot rocked across the stony plain.

Samson scowled and chewed his lower lip.

Over the evening meal before the caves in the Etam cliffs, Samson sought me out. I had been welcomed back as from the grave, my tale told and retold to the women and the few men who had not accompanied the war party toward Ashkelon I was eating a good stew and sipping chilled wine, but I made room for him on the wooden bench before a big fire.

He waited until the women came and took the platters away before he said what was on his mind. "When do you go to this pleasure villa, Kharnos?"

"In a few days They were making preparations to leave when I rode out of Ashkelon. I'll give Alatta a chance to get acquainted with the villa before I visit her."

I leaned closer to the big Habiru. "They're going to have a rare time there, believe me. Pagan rites, the worship of Dagon, the fertility rituals, pleasure gardens sacred to Ashtaroth—you can imagine."

Samson ran his tongue over his lips. The heavy vein of sensuality that ran so strong in his blood was never very far from the surface. Already he was picturing Delilah in his arms convincing her that he was the one man she would take again and again. His huge hand rubbed his bare knee.

"Take me along, Kharnos," he growled.

"Eh? To the pleasure palace?"

He nodded almost in embarrassment. "I want to go."

I frowned at him. "You won't make trouble? I mean, none of this grabbing a bronze gate and killing a score of Philistines? Alatta is a warm wench. I wouldn't want to get tumbled out of

her bed some night because you lost your temper and started a fight."

"No trouble. No fight. My word on it."

We clasped hands gravely. His eyes were dancing with glee; I hoped he could not read the expression in mine; I had as good as put a dagger in his heart.

NINE

The pleasure house in the valley of Sorek

From afar, the great villa gleamed like alabaster in the morning sunlight. It was built in tiers, its lower levels given over to colonnaded walks and marble fountains where colored waters splashed between ilex trees and palms, with an occasional cypress lifting its leafy branches outward to provide shade from the Canaanite sun. It had been built by the grandfather of Shepthazzah as a retreat from the cares of state but its upper portions were walled and towered so that it might serve also as a fortication.

Samson blinked when he saw it. There was music in the warm air from kitheras and flutes, and the scent of growing flowers and perfumed vines added to the enchantment of the moment. We could see women in the gardens, women walking along the upper terraces, women swimming naked in a marble pool, their white flesh flashing in the water.

"Hurry," he said heavily. "Hurry, Kharnos."

Not waiting for me, he set off down the slope at a lumbering trot. I toed my stallion after him. Now that the moment was upon me, I felt reluctance in my veins. There was still time to turn, to cry out a warning to the big Habiru, yet my tongue would not stir in my mouth. I rode as dumb as any ox, letting my good friend run toward the doom that awaited him.

Up to the huge bronze gate he trotted and his fist made a thunder on its carved surface. As I reined up, I could hear feminine laughter from beyond the garden walls.

"Admit us, admit two travelers," the Habiru bellowed. "Admit two hungry, lonely wanderers." There was anticipation and delight in his voice, for he too had heard that amorous giggling.

The door swung open. A girl stood in the opening clad only in a thin chiton that left her arms and all her long legs bare. Thick yellow hair fell down her back.

"Ashtaroth gives greetings," she dimpled. "What seek you?"

"Rest and comfort. A little wine, a few kisses."

More girls ran to help push wider the big bronze door. Samson goggled at their bodies, displayed so enticingly in transparent linens and tiny aprons. A few wore only Egyptian kilts so that their breasts dried the juices in a man's throat. As if he walked in his sleep, Samson moved into the garden. I followed at his heels.

He was almost surrounded now by chattering, giggling beauties. They pressed around him, fondling his heavily muscled arms, admiring the strength of his chest and legs. When he lifted one or two by their armpits to kiss them the others burst into delighted squeals, clapping their palms in joy.

Nor did I go unattended More than one temple harlot touched her breasts to my back, ran her quivering fingers along my flanks beneath my garments. Their perfumed hair tickled my skin as the wind blew it against me and their lovely eyes, shaded with kohl and tinted green, promised unmentionable delights.

"Khamos, you're the best friend a man ever had!"

I made no answer. He expected none, being too busy with the women crowding about him, hurrying him along, to do more than run with them. I felt hands on my garments as we trailed along the garden paths after them, loosening catches, slipping the chiton from my shoulders. Perfumed hands had long ago caught hold of my sword and removed it, with my belt and dagger. Now I was down to my cotton loincloth.

In a moment that too was gone.

We were at the edge of a great marble pool filled with warm and scented water. His arms full of naked girls, Samson went toppling over the edge. His body made a great geyser when it hit. I wondered briefly if he could swim but felt myself lifted by a dozen soft arms and thrown into the warm pool waters beside him. I went under the surface still hanging onto two of the girls.

Within moments we were sporting in the pool with a score of naked nymphs. Water splashed. Soft laughter rang out. Hands touched and stroked below the surface. I heard Samson roaring in pleasure. I will admit that my own palms stroked and caressed water-warmed breasts from time to time. It was a pleasant and exciting pastime and for a little while I almost forgot why we were here.

A flurry of music drew our attention.

Two girls were pressed against me, front and back. Two more were on either side of me, while another reached past them to kiss my mouth hungrily. The girls drew back, turning without releasing their holds on me.

Delilah stood on the stone landing above a flight of steps. She wore a golden tiara in her copper hair and a thin robe of black linen under which her dusky skin was clearly visible. Contrasted to these pretty girls who played with us in the pool waters, her loveliness stood out. They were delightful, but she was woman incarnate, a goddess come to Earth.

I heard the breath rasp in Samson's throat.

"Kharnos," she called down with a smile. "Welcome to my nymphae." Her eyes moved past me and touched the big Habiru. "And welcome to your friend, too. By his size, he must be Samson."

"It is Samson, Delilah. I risked your displeasure by bringing him here—but he has promised to behave."

Her red mouth curved gently, in amusement. As her thin eyebrows lifted, she asked, "No tricks, now? No broken bones? No fighting?"

Samson rumbled laughter, repeating the promise he had made me. I could see he was quite taken by the Philistine woman. His eyes bulged and his mouth was open in something akin to awe. As she came down the steps almost lazily he swallowed hard and his eyes opened wider.

"Come, Kharnos—join me," she invited, seating herself on a porphyry bench. She waved to Samson, asking him also to sit beside her.

The big Habiru begged off, but he came to the side of the pool and stood there, eating her with his eyes. There was a personal modesty about him which was lacking in what the Habiru thought of as foreign or pagan countries. For myself, I went up a few short steps at the end of the pool and let a couple of the girls towel me dry, then wrap a short apron about my middle.

"What of Alatta?" I asked when I was seated beside Delilah. "I hope you brought her along with you."

"I left her sleeping," she nodded, playing up to our lie. "There is to be feasting tonight and she wants to be at her best." Delilah leaned over and called down at Samson. "You'll stay for the feasting, won't you? A good friend of Kharnos is welcome here."

"I'll stay—and gladly," he nodded.

Delilah turned her face away to hide a smile. I think the

same thought touched her as it did me, that it would need more soldiers than all Philistia could muster to turn Samson away from what was promised this night.

After a while Delilah asked us to excuse her, saying that she needed rest, since the feasting and the dancing would go on until dawn. I was not tired but the prospect of a soft bed allured me. Delilah promised to send a girl to guide us to a chamber which would be ours while we were at the villa.

Samson lay down on his bed and soon his eyelids were drooping. From somewhere gentle music filled the air, inducing drowsiness. My own body sank into a torpor from which I could scarcely move a muscle. I wanted desperately to get away from the big Habiru, to see Delilah and learn what she planned, but I could not leave until he was asleep; as a result I slumbered before he did, and woke after him.

There were Philistine garments laid out for us, the short chiton of the Achaeans, leather sandals, colored ribbons in which to bind our hair. Samson laughed when he saw himself in these foreign garments, being used only to the skins of beasts or to the Habiru *kolbur*. I told him he looked like a born pagan, which he did; I preferred him in his skin garments in which he looked so natural. In a chiton he appeared to lose something of his strength, as though his god Yahweh had deserted him.

Pretty girls came to escort us to the feast which was to be held in an open courtyard, flagged and hung with oil lamps and metal lanterns. A number of tables, low and wide, had been set beside a dozen couches. There was a large space for dancing, and room between the couches and the tables for the servers to move at will.

The feast began simply enough, with sea food and lamb cooked in coals and covered over with spiced sauces. Samson ate with gusto, being urged on by Delilah who pretended awe concerning his appetite. He laughed at her sallies and drank the rich wine two Amorite women poured for him, making sure his cup was always full.

Dancing girls—the same ones I had seen perform at the palace the night I stood bodyguard to Delilah, for I recognized them—came to tempt us with their flaunted hips and buttocks. Samson stared, forgetting to eat and drink until Delilah arose and thrust her body against him, so that he had to move to let her slide onto his couch beside him.

"This is the wine of Meroe," she whispered, putting a goblet to his lips. "Taste it. Do you enjoy those dancers? Which of

them do you like most? The one with the breasts like melons? Perhaps I shall give her to you as a gift."

Made bold by wine, he growled, "I want only you."

She laughed and kissed the corner of his mouth. Under her thin byssus garment her flesh gleamed like pink marble. It took no imagination to make out the boldness of her jutting breasts. The loveliness of her thighs and buttocks might have been carved by such a master artist as the Minos hired to decorate the halls of his palace at Knossos. Samson was torn between watching the naked dancing girls and caressing this most beautiful of women whose body lay so close to his hands.

He did what any sensible man would have done. He watched the girls while he sipped the wine and at the same time let his palm slide under the thin byssus tunic and touch Delilah. The big Habiru was no scented sophisticate who could take such sensual teasing and remain calm. Within moments he was bellowing with pleasure, hugging Delilah to him, covering her face and mouth with kisses.

I turned my head away. It was a pain to watch them. This woman I loved, who admitted she loved me, was acting the role of temple harlot to perfection I could hear her voice calling his attention to the girls—telling him intimate secrets about them, begging him to compare certain parts of their bodies, asking which of them he might care to enjoy—in the coarsest words, words I did not think that she knew.

I rolled off the couch and stood up. They did not see me, Samson because he was staring down at the woman whose breasts he was uncovering, Delilah because her eyes were closed. The musicians played steadily, the dancers continued to undulate and quiver. To me, this was empty, senseless. I was a sober man watching a drunken orgy without the desire to participate in it.

My sandals made no noise as I walked from the courtyard and its smoking lamps onto an upper terrace path. The cool winds off the hills felt good on my flushed face and wine-warm body. I walked a long time, hearing only faintly the sounds from the flagstoned court, the occasional high squeal of a girl, the bull bellow of the big Habiru.

The moon was high in the night sky when I saw Mahthys. She was sitting on a bench staring westward toward the coast. She wore an Egyptian tunic and there was a silver fillet about her hair. She turned as I strode toward her, crying out her name.

A moment she stared, then she was gasping, sobbing, running toward me. Arms wide, she hurled herself into my arms, kissing my throat, my jaw, my lips. We held one another, shivering. When she drew away to stare up at me, her eyes were enormous.

"Is—is he dead yet?"

"Dead? Samson? Of course not. He's enjoying himself with Delilah and having the time of his life."

"He should be dead," she whispered.

I smiled down at her. "Why should he, little goose?"

"All his wine is poisoned, and his food. Every morsel he chews, every drop he swallows, is alive with poison."

So that was how it would be done. Deadly poison administered while he ate and drank. I sighed. It was as good a way as any, and better than most. At least it would be quick. I am no poisoner and have had little to do with them in my life, but I had heard of the deadly puff adder, certain mushrooms, of grains of opium and castor seeds. There would be men in Ashkelon expert in their use.

"He will be dead then, soon enough," I agreed. My middle was cold and clammy as though I too had swallowed some lethal draught.

"What about us?" she whispered. "Why don't you go away from here? There are horses below in the stables, with pack asses to carry food and garments."

I looked over her head at the moon riding high in the dark sky. To run away would be so easy. Throw Mahthys over a horse and gallop off beside her out of Canaan, away from Philistia to—

Ah, to what land? What city?

Troy was no more. Crete was a strange land to her now, while Egypt was forbidden lest she be sold to slavery. In Mycenae and in Sparta I was still a Trojan, liable to death. There was no place in all this world open to Kharnos of Ilion.

As well remain to face the end of my treachery.

Mahthys shook her head at me until her long black hair swirled. Frantically her hands caught my arm, her fingers gripping like writhing snakes.

"Come to my room. I—I have something to show you. Quickly, quickly!" She ran ahead of me, leading the way with her twinkling heels. There was a strange excitement in Mahthys which was communicating itself to me. I found myself running after her, my heart thudding in my ribcase.

She thrust back a brocade curtain, revealing a small cham-

ber from which a balcony extended over part of the upper gardens. A wooden bed stood in an alcove, wooden pillow and red coverlets forming a splash of color below a wall torch brightly blazing. A table with thin bronze legs like standing cranes and a small Grecian chair were the only other objects of furniture in the room.

No, I was mistaken. There was a teakwood chest.

I frowned. Where had I seen that coffer before?

Mahthys ran to it, knelt and threw back its cover. Her hands went into it, lifted out a lyre. She held it up so I could see it more clearly. Of course! This was the harp which Manoah, the father of Samson, had given her in Zorah. It was broken now, shattered beyond repair.

There were tears in her eyes. I remembered how zealously she had cherished it, believing that it and her own life went hand in hand.

"How did it happen?"

"A horse stepped on it when the box fell from a cart and the lyre tumbled out. I ran to save it but I was too late. I've always thought that if it were ever broken—I would die."

"Oh, nonsense," I told her. "That's mere superstition."

"Then come away with me," she begged. "We could leave now. There are horses in the stables we could take. I don't have many things to bring. I'll go like this!"

"Tomorrow," I said.

She crouched and stared up at me. We were looking into one another's eyes when we heard an outburst of applause and laughter. There was an excitement in those voices that made Mahthys come to her feet. Her hands clung together, trembling so that the lyre fell clanging on the floor tiles.

"Samson," she breathed. "He's dead."

"Perhaps not," I muttered.

Side by side we hurried from her room along a ramp to a lower terrace, then along a flagstoned walk to a marble rail. Leaning against this, we could look down into the huge courtyard where Delilah gave her feast.

The remains of many platters could be seen scattered about on the big table that had held the Habiru's food. The head of an ox, the scraps of what once had been a dozen fowl, the crumbs of a dozen loaves of bread, the shells of mussels: he must have eaten enough to satisfy the hunger of a score of men this night. He was standing in the cleared space with many girls about him staring at him in awe as he gripped two links in a massive chain.

Sweat stood out on his forehead as he bunched his thick shoulders He was panting harshly with strain. His hands flexed and tightened on those metal links. His arms looked like marble, so rigid was his every muscle.

Mahthys pressed against me, awe in her voice as she asked, "What is he doing?"

"Trying to snap the chain," I told her grimly.

She gasped in disbelief, leaning forward to stare the harder. No man could do what Samson was trying. I had seen chains like that used to hold ships at anchor during a heavy storm. A single man could not—

A link began to yield.

I could see it open slowly, Samson grunted, bent lower. His mouth was wide to help his breathing. He was very pale. The thin chiton which was his garment had long since split its seams from the awesome power of his heavily thewed body.

The chain parted with a loud report.

Its ends went flying across the court. Samson stood there, his great chest heaving, legs spread apart. A girl ran to him with a brazen ewer filled with wine. Poisoned wine? Samson saw it, clutched it, tilted it to his lips. He drank and drank.

I saw Delilah make a motion with her hand. More girls ran to him, began to run their soft hands over his chest, his thighs and belly. When he lowered the ewer he looked at the girls and grinned, then pushed them away.

His eyes were on Delilah.

She stood proudly beside her couch but I thought I saw fear distend her eyes and nostrils. If what Mahthys said was true, if all his food and all his wine had been poisoned, what kept him upright? He had the vitality, the musculature of an ox, but was this enough? What manner of man was this who could feast on deadly poisons, then snap a massive chain and still lust after a woman?

Samson moved toward her. His hands came out, caught her thin garment and drew her toward him. The byssus tore, revealing her flesh. She gave a little cry, tried to twist away from the lips that caught her mouth and ran down her throat to the large, tilted breasts. She was swung high in his hands, held aloft as his mouth caressed her nakedness.

It was a nightmare scene, the girls around them frozen with fright, Delilah straining to be free yet afraid to cry out lest she rouse some brutal instinct which seemed so close to the surface in such a man. Her body was a plaything in his hands, turned this way and that, held always off the ground.

"Stop him, stop him," cried Mahthys.

I shook my head. At this moment, crazed by the excess of food and wine they had forced on him, by the strange force in him which had enabled him to snap those mighty links, he was not the Samson I had known. One thing only was in his mind. Nothing could turn him from it.

He carried Delilah to a large table, cleared it of platters and drinking goblets with one sweeping motion of his arm, then put the woman across it on her back. He ripped off his chiton, his cotton loincloth.

Then it seemed that he could not move.

His mouth opened and closed, making terrible noises. His hands lifted to his throat and his eyes bulged. A wind came up to blow his heavy hair back and forth, sweeping his beard across the thick black hairs on his chest. The poison was eating in him, now, running through his veins, bringing oblivion to this incredible man.

He lifted his gaze to the sky.

His voice cried, "Yahweh! Yahweh!"

Then he toppled face down across the table onto Delilah, stunning her, sending the table flying, skidding along the flagstones. She went one way, the table another, and Samson dropped between them.

Mahthys screamed. I vaulted the rail, raced through the shrubbery which lay below it and onto the flagstones. I bent above Delilah, lifting her in my arms.

Her eyes opened. She saw my face, recognized me and smiled. "Is he—?" When I nodded, she let her lids close slowly, sighing, "He was a bull of a man. I never saw such strength. He swallowed enough poison to kill an army."

I carried her across the flaggings and up a stone staircase. A girl ran before my sandals to show the way. I had a glimpse of Mahthys staring at us with wide eyes but for once I paid no heed to her. In a great bedchamber lit with bronze cressets in the walls, hung with heavy golden drapes, I placed Delilah on a wide round couch.

Delilah stirred, calling a slavegirl to her, saying, "Minnetha, you must tell the soldiers down below. They will bring ropes and bind him."

"If he's dead, why tie him up?" I wondered.

She shook her head. "He may not be dead, only exhausted. You do not yet realize what he did this night. He broke a table with his bare hands. He lifted an ox on his shoulders. He pulled an ilex tree from the ground, roots and all! All this—

while the poisons were working in him. Can you wonder that I feel no ordinary method can kill such a man?"

Her voice had risen in pitch. She was sitting up on the couch, forgetting her nakedness, almost hysterical. I remembered the way she had fought with Samson, how pitiful her female muscles had been against his might. I drew her against me, soothed her, kissed the tears from her eyes. At last she fell into a fitful slumber.

I tiptoed from the room, leaving her to the ministrations of her women. Being anxious to see what was being done with the big Habiru, I made my way back to the courtyard. Mahthys was gone from the terrace rail. I wondered if she guessed at last how I felt toward Delilah.

Below, three soldiers were binding thick ropes around the inert Samson. I went down to them, stood watching. One of the men nodded at me.

"He isn't dead yet. Dagon alone knows why, if everything I've heard this night is true."

"It's true. He ate a fantastic amount of poison."

"He must thrive on it, like a poison maid."

I had heard tales of these poison maids, kept by great rulers and fed poison from infancy, first in tiny droplets, then in larger doses until they became immune. Their flesh is impregnated with it, as is their spittle and their sweat so that if a man lie with any of them he absorbs enough of this poison to kill him, though the girl herself is unaffected. I had never seen such a woman and had always considered such tales fit only for the ears of children. Since Samson ate no poison every day of his life to make his body immune, only his God, this Yahweh, could have protected him.

Wrapped in thick ropes until only his head and feet were visible, the Habiru strongman slept on. I waited as did the others until he should either die or recover consciousness. A few hours past sunrise his eyelids fluttered. His mouth twitched, opened and—he yawned, shaking his head.

"Khamos," he cried when he saw me. "Come set me free."

I would have gone to him but one of the soldiers drew a dagger and put it to my back. To Samson he said, "You are our prisoner, Habiru. Like that we intend carrying you to Ashkelon."

Samson looked at him, speaking no word. His face was flushed as if he were a schoolgirl listening to a lewd story. I realized too late that under the ropes which enclosed him he

was flexing his mighty body. The soldiers around me realized it too late, also.

A rope snapped. Then another and another. They went flying this way and that as he lifted out one arm, then the other, a leg and then both legs. The remnants of the shredded ropes he cast away, then lifted a marble bench and using it like a battleaxe, moved among the soldiers, striking them so hard with it their skulls cracked open.

Within seconds, we stood alone in the courtyard.

"Kill me too, Samson," I told him suddenly.

He dropped the bench and shook his shaggy black head. "You are my friend, Kharnos. It was not your fault the Philistines thought to capture me."

"But it is. I brought you here."

He showed white teeth in a grin. "I wanted to come. If you hadn't brought me I'd have been angry with you."

"Sit down, Samson. I have a story to tell you. This time I shall speak only the truth. I've been living a lie with you lately."

I told him how I had been sent from Ashkelon to bring him to Delilah, that they had kept Mahthys as a hostage for my fulfillment of the bargain. He listened quietly, saying no word until I was done. Then he smiled and put a hand on my knee.

"This is as Yahweh wills, Kharnos. You are no more than His instrument, as I am myself. Perhaps it is time for me to be punished for having broken His laws as I have done by bedding foreign women. This is a weakness in me which I have tried to fight, but cannot. Speaking of foreign women, where is Delilah?"

He would hear no more, saying that if it had not been me, it would have been another who would have brought him eventually to Delilah. "I have a feeling that her fate and mine are closely bound, Kharnos. As soon as I saw her I felt this in me, where my heart beats. I'm going to her now."

He moved away, towering gigantic in the morning sunlight, with only the remnants of his tattered chiton wrapped about his middle. I sat on the bench for hours, my head lowered, hearing no sound anywhere in the villa, with the dead soldiers scattered at my feet.

2.

I slept in my room until dusk when the sound of music woke me. Again fresh garments had been placed ready to my hand. I rose, donned them and went out into the early evening.

Once again the courtyard was set with oil lamps and tall candles, with tables and couches. Girl musicians played on kytheras and flutes. Samson was already at table, with Delilah close beside him. She glanced at me as I approached. There were faint purple rings under her eyes, and she seemed exhausted; I understood then that Samson had spent the day with her, making love.

She glanced away and reached for a wine goblet.

As I took my place a pair of slender girls came toward me bearing a tray which held a silver ewer and a goblet of Hurrian craftsmanship, an exquisite thing carved to represent the goddess Ishtar receiving homage. I let one of the girls fill the cup, then drew her down beside me. She giggled and flushed but she stretched out alongside me willingly enough.

Mahthys was nowhere around. I imagine she was keeping well away from me until she made up her mind about Delilah and me.

I tried not to watch as Samson ate the many courses placed before him. I caught an occasional glimpse of his strong white teeth sinking into roast meat, tearing at it as might a starved animal. I saw him lift a loaf of bread, break it in half, cram mouthfuls between his lips. He was gross and brutal, unlike the Samson I had known; perhaps the poison in his system demanded food to blot it up, to purge it from his system.

The girl on my couch grew very drunk, eating little but emptying two full ewers of golden Syrian wine. She teased me by pressing herself against my body, reaching out to stroke me with her fingertips, then withdrawing, laughing softly, when I would have gathered her to me. She kept me busy with her little games so that I did not see all that Samson ate and drank this second night. Later, I saw the emptied platters, the bones and shells left on the wooden trays, and there were as many this night as there had been the previous evening.

A girl laughed shrilly in high excitement.

I turned on my couch, staring. A pretty Nubian had fastened her fingers in the Habiru's beard and was tugging at it. Her hands were coming free, gripping tufts of hair. Samson was laughing as helplessly as the girl, holding Delilah to him with one hand and stroking the Nubian with the other.

"You'll snatch me bald, girl," he protested.

"Let me, let me," she screamed.

Perhaps it was the poison at work in his blood that had loosed his hairs in the skin. His beard was literally being pulled from his face by those strong brown fingers Now Delilah was joining in the game, from fear or amusement I did not know. Her fingers were in the thick black hairs of his head. She was tugging at them, yanking them loose.

The girl beside me whimpered.

I only stared, wondering what strange story would be told of this queer happening. Samson was being plucked bald by Delilah and the African girl. Soon his face was as smooth as if it had been shaved by a razor. In a few scant seconds his head would be equally bald. He was laughing weakly, his hands unable to fend off either woman.

The poison saps his strength at last, I thought. His muscles are turned to water so that even a woman is a match for him. One result of the poison is that his hair is falling out, the other that his strength is no greater than that of other men.

I watched, scarcely breathing.

When all his hair was gone, Delilah twisted free of him. He lay sprawled on the couch, one hand up as if he would catch hold of her and draw her back to him. I think at that moment he loved her very much, as much as Samson could love any one woman. Just as fiercely, she hated him. She was remembering the long morning and the longer afternoon when he had invaded her bedchamber and exhausted himself on her body.

Her hands clapped. She was imperious, standing there, chin tilted proudly. I could see the marks on her skin where Samson had forgotten his great strength while handling her. Her hard face said that she would make him pay for every bruise, every discoloration, every caress he had given her.

Soldiers came running, scabbards jingling.

Samson came off the couch to meet them but he staggered and I knew then that he was not the man he had been. His body quivered and his hands shook and only his reputation held the soldiers from his throat.

It hurt me deep inside to see him standing there like a baited bear on a chain, weaving slightly, blinking his eyes. His flesh had fought the poison for a long time but now it was coursing through his veins with terrible power, bringing weakness and impotence in its wake.

I pushed the girl away and got to my feet. There was no

poison in my body. I struck one of the soldiers on the jaw and wrested his blade from him.

"Follow me, Samson," I growled. "I'll see you safely out of this."

Delilah screamed, "Kharnos! You fool. Don't interfere! It will undo everything."

I glowered at her. "I can't let him be taken like this. Look at him. He's half dead on his feet. His strength is gone along with his hair."

The soldiers rushed me. I cut one man down, met the blade of another with my sword, watched sparks fly. Samson gave a cry and lurched forward. His hands went to a wooden bench, a bench that once he could have lifted with a single hand. Now it was too much for him.

As the Philistines battled me, they saw the Habiru giant grit his teeth in despair when the bench failed to budge. One of them shouted the news to the others as though they could not see for themselves.

Half a dozen of them deserted me to tackle Samson. I saw him go down under their hurtling bodies, saw a knot of tangled men roll back and forth across the courtyard flagstones. Even while this was going on, the others were backing me against a high stone wall. I fought as I had not fought in a long time but there were too many of them. No more than four could come at me at once; two I cut down and left sprawled on the flaggings but others came to take their places. The clangor of iron blades meeting was an orchestration to the thick bellows with which Samson announced his weakness, his inability to thrust six Philistines from him.

They had turned him on his face. Four of them were enough to hold him while two others came with manacles and chains. They knelt on his spine and twisted his arms up behind his back as they put the copper shackles on his wrists.

Delilah cried to the officer in command of the soldiers, "Let the other man be. He brought the Habiru here. He was working with me."

The officer was shaking his head sullenly. "Too late for that, highness. He's killed some of my men. He offered to save the Habiru. You heard him yourself. For this he must die!"

A blade beat my sword from my fingers.

A big Philistine with a red beard drew back his sword. Its point gleamed like fire in the torchlight. I wore no armor. It would shear through my flesh as does a knife in butter. I whispered a prayer to Cybele—

Something soft and warm slammed into me, drove me back against the garden wall. I smelled perfume, tasted the touch of lips on mine. The soldier lunged. His sword went into the woman clinging to me so that she gave a wild cry and her body stiffened in agony.

Mahthys died pressed against me, held to me on the blade that impaled her. Her eyes rolled in her head as she collapsed. My arms gripped her, caught her. I kissed her, whispering her name.

She had begged me to go away. Perhaps some inner vision had come to her of her own fate if we remained. The lyre that Manoah had given her lay broken in her room. It was too late for her to escape, now. Tears stung my eyes as I lowered her to the ground and knelt beside her.

There was a little froth of blood beside the corner of her lip. I bent and kissed it. It tasted bitter as gall.

A hand touched my shoulder. I looked up at the officer. "Kill me," I said to him. "Get it over." He only looked embarrassed and shook his head, telling me that he had changed his mind; he would let Shepthazzah decide my fate. I, like Samson, was his prisoner.

Delilah would not look at me as they led me away. Instead I saw her staring down at the dead body of the little Egyptian girl who had given her life to save mine.

3.

They brought us at the end of long chains across the Shephaleh from Sorek as far as Gaza. A chariot walked before us with two spearmen always facing us, straddling the ends of the giant links banded about our middles and fastened securely to the chariot floor by spikes. Behind us walked a hundred soldiers. We had no chance to escape. The slightest move would have brought a dozen spears flying through the air at us.

Samson walked like a dead man, staring straight ahead.

His bald head, his hairless face, gave him the appearance of a vulture. There was a terrible weakness in his big body; sometimes he crouched over, his middle convulsing in the nausea that gripped him. He spoke no word either to me or to the Philistines who taunted him

When we came within sight of Gaza, he gave a terrible groan as if some inner voice whispered of the fate in store for him. His huge hands caught hold of the chains and tugged but

the strength was gone out of his arms with the poisons he had swallowed. Once he would have brought the chariot back to him, horses and all, but not now.

The walls of Gaza were lined with people.

They screamed at sight of Samson in his chains. From those wallwalks they hurled down refuse, rotting vegetables, dead and stinking fowl, the entrails of animals. The soldiers scattered, leaving us to face alone that barrage of offal. Samson wept with anger, his wide back bowed before the onslaught.

When the people wearied of their fun, soldiers caught the horses by their bridles and walked them through the gates of the city. There were bronze gates similar to the gates of Gath which Samson had torn down. I wondered if he thought about the day he had lifted those bronze gates against the Philistines. I did, remembering how Mahthys and I had been made prisoners, how I had freed her and myself only by betraying Samson.

A melon caught me across the face, splattering. I reared back, bellowing my anger, shaking my chains. I ran close to the chariot to take up the slack; now when my hands tightened, they held a goodly length of bronze links. I swung the chain like a flail; one soldier I took across his throat, another at his middle. They fell, bawling their agony.

Then a score of spear-butts banged into me, driving the breath from my body, making my head buzz in pain. I fought to stay on my feet, but could not. I toppled sideways. The charioteer shouted and whipped at his horses. The chain ran its length, then dragged me forward, snapping my arms almost from their sockets.

I bounced and slid along the cobblestones.

When the chariot stopped I was dazed and bleeding. I crouched on my knees, sobbing for breath, dimly aware that men were unfastening Samson from his chains, leading him between two tall wooden posts. I shook my head, clearing it to some extent. Shaking, I managed to get to my feet.

Two Philistines moved up on either side of me.

Soldiers were gripping Samson by his wrists, forcing them apart, lifting them so that other men could tie him to metal rings set into the posts. To one side a bronze brazier was set over a heap of flames. Two rods were heating in the brazier.

My blood ran cold. Did they intend to brand him?

One of the soldiers at my elbow nudged me with his spear. "Move and I put this into your thigh, Trojan," he growled.

More men came and caught Samson by his legs and by his

arms. Another put a muscular forearm across his throat so that the Habiru strongman was bent back and downward, staring upward at the sky. A bearded man lifted out a poker, blowing on it so the metal flared cherry red with heat.

I knew now what the Philistines meant to do.

Samson did not know until he saw the poker glowing crimson above his left eye. His body tensed, shuddering. His mouth opened and he roared.

The poker stabbed downward into his eye.

Samson screamed. His body bucked upward and sideways, hurling men from him as a dog sheds water after a wetting. He tried to put his hands over his face but the cords fastened to the posts kept them spreadeagled. His feet danced while he screamed and his middle bowed forward as he retched.

The fallen men scrambled to their feet, ran once again to secure their handholds. The second poker was brought forward to the accompaniment of an unending roaring from the Habiru who was in agony. The executioner never faltered. He held the blazing poker suspended for the right moment, then plunged it downward.

Samson crumpled in the ropes that held him.

He hung like a dead man so that the people murmured all around us, fearing they had been robbed of more sport. A girl ran up with a jar of liquid filth and threw it over the unconscious man. His great body jerked, then was still.

One of the soldiers chuckled. "Lucky for you no such fate was decreed as your punishment, Trojan."

"You're to be flayed alive on Dagon's feast day," said another.

They laughed as at a joke.

After a while they cut Samson down and threw him in the dirt beside me. He lay like a dead man but his great chest moved so I knew he was alive. I thought to myself, he would be better off if he had died between those posts.

TEN

The feast day of the bull-god, Dagon

The great millstone in the warehouse of Ashkelon turned slowly as a hundred hands pushed against its smooth wooden handles. Fifty slaves walked perpetually in deep grooves rutted in the dirt floor, chains swinging, clanking, feet shuffling. Dur-

ing the morning, the sun came in to bake us through a great open door and two windows set high in the walls; in late afternoon there was always a chill wind off the harbor to the west, so that we came close to freezing. The mill was a big one, owned by the king himself. In it were kept policial prisoners and men taken in war.

We were treated well enough, all except Samson.

The overseers gave us good food and a glass of wine each day. To Shepthazzah we were wealth, for our bodies were the means by which the huge grindstone turned grain to flour, the flour being sold to the makers of bread and cakes at a fine profit. Samson alone was plagued. His food was the same as ours but instead of wine he got goat's milk, and every day they unchained him to lead him into the great square where the people of Ashkelon could insult and torment him.

Where the huge doors were open to let air in and chaff out, we could see, as we came around the moving grindstone, that they chained the blind Habiru strongman to a thick wooden stake set deep in the ground. No ordinary man could budge that heavy pole; if he had his strength, Samson could have ripped it up with one hairy hand and laid about him until the Ashkelonites fled screaming in terror. But Samson was himself no longer, only a pallid copy of the man he had been. The poisons fed him by Delilah still worked in his body, sapping his strength.

The first time they unchained him and led him out, no man said a word. But when they brought him back, beaten with whips and sticks, covered with bruises from thrown stones, stinking of offal and ordure, a yell went up; the men wanted no part of that smelling, filth-stained thing walking beside them. So great was the uproar that overseers came with whips, but when the men refused to work they took Samson away and let him wash himself in the harbor. Now it was accepted pratice; though they came for Samson always at noon of the day, they let him bathe himself before they returned him to his place at one of the long wooden handles.

Every day was as a feast day in Ashkelon because of Samson. Groups of men and women came to the mill doors and stood staring at the big man as he walked with bowed head as if to hide his raw red eye-sockets from the world. They cursed him. Some threw things, until the other slaves made such a row about getting hit with rotten fruit or a big stone intended for Samson that the overseers had to deny visitors the

delight of venting their fury on him; for that they had to wait until noon, when he was put on display in the square.

All the way from the pleasure villa in the valley of Sorek to Gaza, it had been the same. First the soldiers had taken delight in hitting him with whips or the flats of their scabbards, revealing the fear in which they had held Samson by the very bitterness of their attacks on him.

When the gates of Ashkelon opened to the victory march he fell and was dragged prone behind the chariot to the Square of the Pillars before the great palace. Bleeding, bruised and blind, he had been hauled to his feet and held for Shepthazzah to inspect The Tyrant of Ashkelon seemed very pleased at his prisoner. Privately, I think he had regarded the capture of Samson as impossible.

Delilah came to plead my case, explaining how Mahthys had died to save me, that I had drawn my sword at the last minute in a vain attempt to save Samson only in the heat of combat.

Shepthazzah shook his head. His eyes, when they touched me, were cold and hard. "The Trojan had defied me twice, Delilah. Not even for you may I spare him."

They took me and chained me to the mill-handle directly behind the broad back of the big Habiru. I saw him unfastened daily and led away, then watched when they brought him back to manacle him once again to his wooden shaft. In the dark of night when the others slept I tried to accept the blame for his predicament but he would have none of it.

"You did as Yahweh willed, Kharnos. No more, no less. It is His will that I am here."

"Perhaps we can escape?" I asked hopefully.

"If He wills it so," the Habiru replied.

I wanted to rant at him for such insane faith but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. I could do no more than pull the corner of my blanket over my face and lie there waiting to fall asleep.

The days and the nights became weeks.

A rumor drifted to the mill room, carried by a burly guard. There was to be a great feast to Dagon, a national holiday for all Philistia At this feast Samson would be exhibited in his bronze chains, made a further mock of, reviled, tortured, perhaps even killed.

We walked about the circular room, our fingers clutching the worn mill-handles as the guard talked on. No man said a word, but we listened carefully. The shuffling feet, then the

clanking chains swinging back and forth and bumping into our knees as we walked, I shall never forget. Nor the sight of Samson's broad bare back as he walked before me, bent over. He lived only in a world of sound, now that his eyes had been put out. Pity stirred in my bowels. I could have wept, remembering him as he had been in the days of his full strength.

One thing about him I noticed. His hair was growing back. When I told him of this he nodded. "I suspected as much. I can feel my strength growing inside my body. When my hair has grown to where it used to be, I shall be as strong as ever."

"Your strength has nothing to do with your hair."

"Yes, it does. I am a Nazirite. As a boy I made a vow that no razor should ever touch my hair. Now my strength depends on it."

"You used no razor," I pointed out.

"I wantoned. I drank wine and I lay with foreign women. It is the same thing."

There was no arguing with him. When I felt most belligerent, when words came most easily to my tongue, all he had to do was turn those raw red eye-sockets toward me, and I fell silent.

And then one morning—

The sound of cymbals and flutes was in the air. We in the millhouse could hear excited laughter, the clattering of hooves and chariot wheels, the mirth of an entire city. This was the feast day of horned Dagon. Pleasure unrestrained was to be king, as it was during the rites of Aphrodite, the Aphrodisia, on the Greek mainland. I remembered the corybantes and *galli* on the high horned altar when Samson had saved both Mahthys and me, and shuddered.

It lacked an hour until noon when armed guards came and, with chisels and mallets, beat the manacles from the wrists of Samson. He stood quietly, suffering this pain, but I could see the awesome muscles of his great back jerk and strut themselves as if they hungered to be free.

To my surprise, the overseer came and with a brass key, unlocked my own chains. At my quick glance, he said, "The Tyrant has decreed that you also are to die today."

Samson overheard the words and turned. "Kharnos? Are we to be united in death as we were in life? If we are, I'll be satisfied."

"I too," I growled, and thought I meant it.

Side by side, we were led through the city streets. A crowd

gathered as we walked along and soon men and women began throwing overripe and rotten fruit and vegetables at us. I told myself it would be over soon. By sundown I would be one with Hector and Priam. At least, I would show this Philistine rabble how a Trojan warrior could die.

My courage failed me for a moment when I saw the great rack that had been rolled out into the square. I would be tied to it, my wrists and ankles bound so tightly that I could not move. Spreadeagled helplessly, I would scream out my life under the knives of the flayers as they ripped the skin from my body.

"You tremble, friend," murmured Samson. "Why?"

"He sees the rack," a soldier grinned. "The flaying rack. Ah, his screams and your bellows will be sweet music in our ears this day, Habiru. It will take a long time to kill the two of you, since you're both such big, strong men. The whole city is looking forward to it."

Under his breath, Samson began to pray.

I think only my ears could hear him as he whispered, "Great Father, O Yahweh! Hear my voice this day. Give my body the strength You once breathed into it. Without You I am less even than a little breeze along a dusty plain. With You inside me, guiding and powering me, I am as the *seistan* that blows down whole buildings!"

He went on but I could hear him no longer for now I was lifted, stripped naked of my cheap cotton garment, and stretched out between the four rack uprights, my wrists and ankles tied so tightly the blood ceased to flow in them. Suspended like that I hung between sky and earth, a target for the people who came thronging around to jeer at me.

Samson was being led up the great stone steps to the mighty pillars on either side of the palace gateway. Chains hung here, loose and empty.

"Farewell, Samson," I cried, lifting my head.

A soldier stuck at me with the butt of his spear but not before I saw the big Habiru turn and stare at me out of his sightless eyes. "Farewell, Kharnos. May Yahweh be with you this day."

"May He indeed," I muttered.

The guard scoffed, "Do you believe this nonsense about a single god, Trojan? Don't tell me they assimilated you in Israel while you were there."

Something in me flared to life. "Yahweh is a stronger god than bull horned Dagon, at any rate," I snarled.

He cuffed me viciously. "Take it back or—"

I laughed at him. "What can you do, soldier—that will hurt me any more than having the skin flayed from my body?"

He paused at that, looking shamefaced. Sullenly he growled, "If your Yahweh is so great, ask Him to free you this day before you die." When he saw me hesitate he laughed, pointing down at me. "Listen to the Yahweh lover, the Trojan turncoat."

The people heard him and flocked around, scenting amusement. I saw a woman tear open her dress, lift out two white breasts and push them in my face. "Pray, Trojan. Pray for freedom and I'll give you these to enjoy before nightfall!"

Another woman lifted her skirt. "And this," she hooted. "You can have this too—if you get free!"

Animals, I thought. Unthinking beasts, dumb brutes. What did such as these know about the gods? For that matter, what did I? I thought of Samson, who was not ashamed to pray. My muscles tensed as I arched my body. I stared at the sky.

"Yahweh—hear me! Give me freedom this day—and death to these unbelievers! Prove your strength. Topple Dagon! Grind him to powder under Your heel!"

The people screamed with laughter. They urged me to pray some more. One or two of the women—it is always the women who are most vicious to a helpless captive, I have found—came with willow sticks and beat on my belly and my thighs until I bit my lip so as not to scream from pain. After a little of this the guards pushed them away.

"Will you kill him before the flayers come?"

"Leave him be, leave him be."

My body shook uncontrollably between the taut ropes that held me. A red film was before my eyes. Pain burned like fire in my groin. Through this red haze I heard the rattle of chariot wheels, the tread of sandalled feet. There was perfume in the air.

My eyes opened. I saw Delilah standing beside the rack, looking down at me. Her tongue came out to touch her lips. There were tears in her eyes. I saw her lips shape a word though I could not hear it.

Her hand made a little sign and a guard came with cool water and put a ewer to my lips I drank gratefully and a little of my strength came back. I lifted my neck and looked at the palace.

Samson was chained between two mighty marble pillars, directly under the keystone of the great arch. His body was a

target for stones and rotten melons flung at him by the populace gathered by the thousands in the square. The excitement of the people was mounting. The dancers who went skipping and hopping about, playing on the syrinx and the flute, the winesellers darting this way and that with their bulging skins of cheap Cretan and red Moesian, added to the gaiety. Men stroked and fondled the women, kissing them, playfully pulling up their skirts or ripping the fronts of their gowns. By nightfall—with the men and women aroused by the bloodletting and the sacrifices to Dagon—the square would be one vast bed laden with rutting couples.

Naked young girls came running now to scatter sacred flowers along the cobbles. They were followed by a huge cart on which the Temple priestesses sat enthroned, their bodies bared to the sun and to the eyes of the worshippers. Whatever man might want one of these priestesses this day, she must go to him and the coins he gave her she must turn over to the god.

Four white bulls moved slowly, mighty horned heads swaying, behind the cart of the priestesses. The crowd shouted at sight of them. Screaming women ran to touch them, stroke them, begging the gift of their fecundity. Shortly after the sunset, the bulls would be dead, their steaming blood poured as an offering to Dagon.

The bulls paced on. Acolytes with censers laden with incense came next, filling the air with blue clouds. Dancing girls caroled, singing, turning handsprings, running back and forth. Two of them saw me, came screaming toward the rack. Their faces were painted, their mouths red as blood, their eyelids tinted green. They reached out to caress me with one hand while with the other they pinched with cruel delight.

"Yahweh! Yahweh, hear me!"

It was a bull bellow ringing in the air. I recognized the voice of Samson hanging in his chains between the pillars of the palace. One of the dancing girls paused with her hand at my thighs to lift her head and stare. I saw her nostrils widen in excitement, and her painted eyes glittered with the cruelty of a cat.

"The Habiru," she screamed and forgot me.

Together the girls ran across the square and up the steps. Now they were on either side of Samson, scratching his great chest with their long, sharp nails until they drew blood.

"Yahweh! Yahweh! Yahweh!"

His was a voice crying in the darkness.

For Samson of Zorah the world was a great black void. It seemed, as he felt the girls' nails cutting into him, and the manacles about his wrists bite deep, that he had never known the pleasure of sight, had never seen the red fire of a sky at sunset or the blue loveliness of a flower growing beside the road. All that had been in a dream, in a forgotten time when he had been someone else. He was only a dumb thing, now. Forever it seemed he lived with pain. This was his punishment, this his retribution which must be made to a just God. First he must pay the penalty, then his Yahweh would smile again on him.

"Yahweh," he roared. "Yahweh! Yahweh!"

The veins on his thick neck stood up. The muscles of his back and arms and legs rose in mighty cables of terrible power. He could sense this strength even through his pain as he thought sometimes that he could feel the hair growing on his head and on his body. As his hair grew thick, so waxed his strength.

"Hear me, Yahweh! Hear me!"

Under his bare feet the ground rumbled to the sound of a mighty voice reverberating in his head. He heard cries of dismay, the gasps and groans of people all around him. Aye, let them cry out in terror. This was his God, speaking to them through him, telling them of His anger.

"Yahweh, give me back my strength!"

Yes, my son. For you have suffered in My name and for this you shall be given the power to smite. It is coming into your body, into your every muscle. Can you not feel it?

Yes, he could feel it. He became aware of each part of him, of his left leg and his right, of his thickly thewed thighs and calves, of his feet braced apart on the stone portico. His middle and his chest, each brawny arm, his bull neck, his wide shoulders knotted with muscle, he was aware of all this. Samson lifted his face and thanked his God silently and with reverence. He put his palms flat to the pillars on either side of him.

Delilah lay on her couch with her chin propped on a hand. She frowned, seeing Shepthazzah sitting so close to a pretty young noblewoman as Ashdod, invited especially for the feast of Dagon. Her name was Illalula and she was sister to the Tyrant of Ashdod himself.

Since Illalula had arrived in Ashkelon, the Tyrant had eyes for no one else. Last night Delilah had seen them strolling

in the palace gardens, had watched as the Tyrant took Illalula in his arms, kissed her overripe mouth, fondled the body she so casually displayed in transparent garments. Her eyes lifted past the couch of the pretty noblewoman to the figure of Samson standing in the palace gateway.

Ever since the big Habiru had been brought in chains to Ashkelon, Shepthazzah had been cold to her. It was as if he blamed her for having gone to the pleasure villa with her priestesses, as if she had committed some act of treachery. Delilah put out her hand to lift a golden goblet to her lips. Inside herself she was cold with fear, with a sense of terrible foreboding.

The couch danced under her. The palace shook.

A woman screamed but her voice was drowned out by the great bellow lifting from the chest of the chained man at the gate. Delilah heard Samson call his God, beg for help. The man was mad, surely! What could he hope to do, chained like a dumb ox for the slaughter? Blinded as he was?

Nevertheless—

Delilah twisted off the couch. A fever was in her blood, a fever of fear and dimly sensed calamity. She saw Shepthazzah bent above the pretty Illalula, hand inside her gown and toying with her breast. She saw Samson with both palms flat against the red pillars. The room was filled with laughter as more and more feasters were turning toward the doorway, gibing at the blind giant.

"Push, Samson—push hard!"

"A hundred shekels if you break a pillar."

Slowly she backed from the couch, past the great golden throne. She did not know quite where she was going or what she intended doing. Only a dumb instinct was in her as it might be in an animal, an awareness of approaching doom. With a harsh cry she turned her back on the feasters and began to run.

The ground was shaking, shuddering.

My body vibrated slowly as it hung between the taut cords suspending me in the rack. Long ago, the ground here in Ashkelon had trembled like this. I had been on my cot in a little Temple cubicle then, the night I went with Delilah to the feast at the palace, the same night I broke Jubaal's nose. Sweat came and stood out on my forehead. This was another such earthquake as that had been.

The rack was slipping, skidding.

A man shrieked. There was a ripping sound, a jagged thunder of noise as if the very ground was being pulled apart. I saw a fissure start along the cobbles, widen rapidly. A dozen men and women—drunk with wine and with the caresses they had been giving one another—went sliding over the rim of that fearsome gap, screaming horribly.

Other people were running through the square, crying out in terror. My own rack was close to the fissure, still sliding. I bellowed for the guards to come and stop it. If the rack toppled into that crevasse, I would plummet into the bowels of the earth. My skin crawled. Sweat ran down my face.

The guards were nowhere around. They had other business to attend to at such a time. My voice was drowned out now by the tortured cry of stones pulled from their mortar. Almost unconsciously my head jerked around.

Samson was pushing at the pillars.

His body seemed to be carved from living ivory, it was so motionless. His muscles stood out in great ridges. His hair seemed full of fire, standing on end. The pillars were giving to the thrust of his arms, cracking inward. Above them the keystone of the arch was shifting sideways. A crack ran down the outer wall of the building.

I could hear men and women screaming in the palace.

The rack shot sideways as a new tremor made the ground shake. My scalp crawled. The ground tilted. The crevasse was there before me.

A ripping sound exploded in my ears. One of the mighty columns lining the great square was falling, toppling before me. It would hit me—crush me as I might a beetle underfoot!

I screamed, fighting the cords that held me prisoner.

The column hit the ground, thudded hard. It wedged itself into a heap of crushed and broken cobblestones. The rack hit it and one of its wooden legs snapped.

My body dropped as the rope holding my right wrist gave way. I sobbed a prayer—not to Cybele but to Yahweh—for the memory was clear in my mind of how I had boasted of His power to the Philistines.

I hung upside down in my ropes, struggling to work free. The ground was rippling now in vast earthwaves, rocking me back and forth. Even so, I could see Samson between the stone pillars with the pillars splitting apart and crumbling and the walls of the palace cracking open.

The metal squares that held the faces of the dead kings of Ashkelon were falling one by one, bouncing and rolling. The

palace walls were caving inward as the keystone slid further and further away from its supports.

Then—

The giant keystone fell, burying Samson under a mass of stone and rubble and fallen pillars. The walls collapsed and were buried by the roof. Dust rose upward in a mighty cloud and the air was rent as if by titanic thunder.

"Samson," I whispered. There was no movement under the huge stone. Was he dead? Crushed to lifelessness? I had to see!

My right hand clawed at the ropes holding my left wrist. In seconds both hands were free, then my ankles. I crawled out from under the wreckage of the rack and ran.

The ground was angled here where it sloped toward the crevasse. My naked feet slipped and slid but held on the cobbles. I bounded up the stone steps of the palace.

The Habiru strongman lay under a ton of shattered masonry. It made a fitting tomb for the enemy of Philistia, I thought, this ruined palace. A monument to his final triumph. Blind and naked, chained to those great columns, he had pulled down the house of his enemy about his ears. Men would tell this tale as long as there were men to talk. They would say that Yahweh had caused his hair to grow back, his strength to return. And perhaps it was the hand of Yahweh which had sent the earthquake, had given Samson the power to thrust against those pillars until the ground waves had come to lend a hand.

Crowd not your beast with things of straw, says the old proverb, lest you add one too many and break its back. The hands of Samson had been the one straw too many added to the might of the landswell which had brought down the palace of Shepthazzah. I drew a deep breath. Samson was dead. There was nothing I could do for him. Yet life still pulsed in me and every heartbeat made it taste the sweeter. Soon men would be coming to assess the damage, to restore order.

I looked around me. The square was empty. It was time to think of myself, to run from here. And then I remembered Delilah.

Surely she was dead? Nothing could live in that collapsed palace! I knew this, yet I had to make some sort of search. Perhaps she was crawling helpless somewhere. My hands might be the ones to lift her out to safety.

I ran lightly around the edge of the building. I could hear

the groans and sobs of men and women in agony, not dead yet but with their bodies crushed and mangled. I leaped over broken shards of masonry, remnants of what once had been proud and mighty columns. My eyes beheld the gleam of golden ornaments, the shreds of a dress, the bodies of dead soldiers caught under falling beams.

I shouted her name. I was like a madman.

How long I spent amid the dusty wreckage, I shall never know. But when my hope was failing, when I told myself to flee and forget Delilah, I saw her. She was lying on her face with a wooden beam across the small of her back. There was blood on the tiles below her leg.

Her back is broken! All her proud beauty is crushed and mangled! Never shall I stare into her bright eyes nor hold her softness in my arms. All I have left is a memory.

My thoughts were chaotic as I bent and tugged at the beam. It was huge and long and heavy but my strength was powered by insanity. I wrenched at the insensate wood until my palms bled, legs apart and my back bowed. The wood lurched. I moved it an inch, two inches, a full foot. I dropped it and bent above this woman I loved.

My hands turned her over. Her thigh was cut where it had scraped on broken tiles, but her chest moved as she breathed. Dirt stained her cheeks and there were furrows that showed where tears of pain and helplessness had streaked it.

I lifted her into my arms. Her body was cold, so that I hunted among the corpses strewing the fallen palace walls until I found a red cloak. I wrapped it around her Aware of my own nakedness for the first time, I ran to a dead soldier and stripped him, donning his chiton and sandals, foregoing his armor but snatching up his sword and belt.

While I was moving away from the palace with Delilah in my arms I heard horses' hoofs and the voices of men shouting. I turned and saw Jubaal sitting the back of a white mare and staring at the ruin of the palace.

My heart slammed in my ribcase. Shepthazzah was dead.

Jubaal would be Tyrant in Ashkelon, now.

I slid behind a building wall into a narrow alleyway and ran. My feet took me toward the docks and the harbor for only here would I find a sure way out of the city. Water would leave no tracks as the ground might do, for men to see and follow.

The huge stone blocks of the harbor wharves were pushed and jumbled together as though a giant hand had lifted and

then dropped them. The waters of the harbor floated over the slave market, the wide area before the warehouses. I sloshed in cold water up to my ankles as I ran with Delilah an inert thing in my arms.

A dozen boats were tumbled and smashed in the wreckage. My eyes assessed them, then discarded them as untrustworthy. Finally I saw a small sailboat bumping against the quay. Its crew were nowhere about; probably drowned or fled to safety, I thought as I lowered Delilah onto a thwart.

I pushed the boat out, clambered in and ran up the sail. It was a trim little craft, used for fishing to judge by the smell that clung to its timbers. There was tackle and a net flung into the space below the steersman's seat. If need be, we might live off the sea until we dropped anchor somewhere.

The wind caught the sail, bellying it outward.

At the same time I heard a cry from behind me on the wharf. A voice shouted, "Kharnos! I see you, damn your eyes. And the wench, too!"

It was Chrysax, bulking big and gross on a huge chunk of granite. His hairy fist lifted and shook. "You won't get far. Jubaal will make me rich for life when I take this news to him."

He turned and ran, cloak flapping at his heels.

2.

Ashkelon was a thin blue line on the horizon when Delilah stirred. Her eyes opened and she lay a moment, gazing at the sky. Wonderingly she lifted her hands, turned them over, then put them to her face. She sat up suddenly and saw me.

"Kharnos! You—we must be dead."

I smiled grimly. "Not yet but soon enough, perhaps." I told her about Chrysax and his threats. At her urging I explained how I had lifted the beam from her and carried her to this boat.

Ever feminine, her hands went to her hair as she bent over the gunwale to study her face in the water. "My face! Why didn't you tell me it was so dirty?"

"There were other things more important at the time. Besides, you didn't seem at all interested in your face a while back."

She flushed and glanced at me slyly.

"How selfish you must think me. I haven't even thanked you for saving my life. You did, you know. If Jubaal had been

the one who'd found me he would have killed me. I think he hated me, especially since I captured Samson. He thought no one could do it but himself."

"Your life may still be in danger," I told her. "If Jubaal sends ships after us, we haven't a chance."

There was a watercask partially filled with water and a dozen or so barley cakes in the locker under the fore thwart. I dared not skirt the shoreline but must strike out boldly westward, for Jubaal would have riders moving north and south from Ashkelon hunting news of us. Little water and almost no food; if Jubaal did not catch us, deadly thirst or hunger would. Our situation was hopeless.

A cold wind had sprung up since Delilah waked. It blew steadily to the west and north, sending whitecaps scudding across the wavetops. We seemed to fly over the water but clouds hid the sun and I had no way of gauging our direction. Now I began to worry about a storm overtaking us, flooding our little craft and capsizing it.

Delilah crept across the boat and into my arms toward nightfall. She was shivering uncontrollably. I held her against me with my left arm while with my right hand I held the tiller. I had no way of telling time but it was midnight as nearly as I could judge when the wind blew away the clouds so that the stars shone down.

With the Great Bear on my right, I sailed westward.

At dawn Delilah woke and insisted on standing her turn at the steerboard while I slept. I shared the barley cakes with her and a sip or two of tepid water before rolling up in a ball on the dry floorboards to sleep.

Her hand shook me awake at high noon.

The sun was a huge molten globe in the sky. Its warmth felt good on my chilled flesh as I got to my feet. Delilah was looking up at me and after a moment I realized that she was terrified.

She turned and I saw why she was frightened.

Three ships were hull down on the horizon, moving toward us. As they came closer I saw the lift and dip of oars as the sunlight caught their wet blades. My heart stopped, then began thumping again. I did not need to see the bull-horns on the sails nor the golden Dagons on the planking of the foredecks to know these ships. They were the low, fast penteconters of the Philistines, the same type of vessels in which,

two hundred years before, the Sea People had raided Egypt and then gone north to settle on the Plain of Sharon.

They would overtake us before nightfall.

"Jubaal," she whispered, clinging to my hand.

I took her place at the tiller and used every trick of seamanship I knew to coax more speed from our little boat. I ran before the wind, knowing that same wind was filling the sails of the Philistine ships. Jubaal would have his overseers lashing the naked backs of the oarsmen in their chains, also. One or the other—wind or oarsmen—I might escape, but not both.

Delilah crept into my sheltering arm.

"There isn't any hope, is there?" she breathed.

"None," I growled.

She sighed and nestled closer. "Perhaps now that I know I'm going to die, I can admit I love you. I can forget I was ever high priestess of Ashtaroth, forget I wanted to be queen in Ashkelon."

My heart thudded wildly. "You love me? You mean it?"

She traced her fingertips across my mouth, nodding. "All I want right now is to be alone with you—in a farmhouse or a city house—it doesn't matter where. To have your children, to hold you in my arms at night."

I kissed her gently but hungrily and we clung together, ignoring the fact that Jubaal was closing on us, narrowing the distance across the waves. I felt her warmth and softness, marveled at the tenderness flooding my body. For this moment of delight I had been born, fought in Troy and in Canaan, betrayed Samson and seen him die.

Yahweh had promised me what I wanted most in life.

Delilah?

I glanced back over my shoulder. The Philistine ships were much closer now. Within the hour they would overhaul us, capture us. There was no escape from them except death.

I drew my sword closer. Delilah shivered; but she nodded, pressing into me. She knew as did I that cold iron would be more merciful to us than would Jubaal of Ashkelon.

ELEVEN

Across the wide sea road

Sunset made a red trail across the sea.

The waters were the color of blood. To my mind it was an omen of the death Delilah and I were soon to embrace. Already my fingers were tightening about the hilt of the iron sword I had taken from the dead soldier in the ruined palace of Ashkelon.

She was unafraid. Her right hand trembled in my fist but she made a tiny smile with her lips and her eyes were tender. Within moments not even Jubaal could harm us. We would be together, locked in the rigidity sacred to the god Erebus, lord of the underworld.

"My love, my love," she breathed.

"At least we go together," I whispered.

Behind us a ballista cord twanged and a great spear silhouetted its length against the sky before slicing into our wake twenty feet aft. Delilah stirred, kissed my throat.

"It is time, Kharnos. To wait would be to tempt the fates. If a shaft hit and wounded you so that you could not—"

Her voice faltered, broke.

She was looking to starboard, beyond me. For a moment I thought I saw hope flicker in her dark eyes, but it soon faded to dull despair. "I thought for a moment—those ships yonder—"

"Ships? What ships?"

I turned my head and sat petrified with amazement.

A dozen long lean vessels were bearing down on us, their bronze battering rams cleanly slicing the waves. Fifty oar-blades to a side dipped and lifted. Huge sails bearing a great horsehead sewn onto their canvas tugged against their rigging.

A lump came into my throat, choking me.

"I dream," I murmured. "We are asleep and dreaming or—we're dead. I haven't seen ships like those in more than three years."

She glanced at me. "Then I too am asleep or—dead. For I see them just as clearly, just as plainly." Her voice broke, attempting lightness. "I saw them first, remember? Do you know them?"

"Know them? Aye, I know them—and they know me."

I stood in my excitement. My arms lifted. I waved. I cupped hands to my mouth and bellowed. Delilah was beside me, gripping my arm.

"Who are they? Who? Who?" she exclaimed.

"The ships of Troy! With the Trojan horsehead on their sails. I commanded ships like that in the old days! But I don't understand. Ilion is a dead, burned city. There are none left alive—none in such numbers at least to man a fleet. Who is it?"

The ballista spoke again. This time its lance was much closer, almost to our bow. The foremost of the Trojan ships had seen the Philistines and was veering to windward toward us. It came in a rush of sails and oars, massive and towering, slicing the sea road with its gleaming ram.

"Trojans!" I roared. "In the name of Ilion! Kharnos here!"

A distant tongue picked up my name and was answered by the voices of a hundred men or more. Tears stung my eyes as I watched the Trojan penteconter come in a rush. Weapons flashed on its main deck. I saw archers stringing their bows, spearmen gripping weapons and huge round shields.

There was a cry of rage behind us where the Philistine ships were fast approaching. I made out Jubaal and Chrysax beside him, hurrying to claim us before the Trojans might swing us aboard their decks. Foolish Jubaal to risk defeat and possible death, all for the sake of a satisfied vengeance! These ships of Ilion were fighting ships, armed and ready, manned by the veterans of a mighty war. I watched with wet eyes as the pentecoster went by in a froth of waves and stroking oars, its rails lined with quiet men in heavy armor.

I waved at the men and they grinned and waved back at me. A few of them blew kisses at Delilah. Happy laughter rang in her throat as she shook her arm at them.

The longship drove into one of the Philistine ships backed by its headlong rush and hundred oars. The Philistine ship split in half. Men were flung overside, ground to pulp on their own timbers as the pentecoster grated over them before shaking itself free. Two more Trojan ships were joining it, pouring a steady arrowfire at the lower Philistines. Men were throwing spears now, calling insults with every toss.

I saw Chrysax drop with an arrow in his throat.

An instant later a spear took Jubaal in the belly and pinned him to his own mast. He hung impaled, bloody hands

wrenching at wood and bronze, hastening his own death by the fierceness of his motions. We could hear his sobbing, cursing voice railing at his destiny across the waters.

Two of the Philistine vessels were settling in the water. A third, half its oarbank crushed, was limping off toward Ashkelon. The pentecosters let it go, tacking about and moving back toward us. A third ship was alongside us now and eager hands were casting a rope overside.

I gripped the rough hemp, caught Delilah in my arms and bid them haul away. We went up easily, my feet moving on the tumblehome timbers. It was as if I walked up the side of the great vessel to its deck.

Hands caught Delilah, swung her over the rail.

I looked around me into familiar faces. I had fought beside some of these men, knew their names, the names of their fathers and their brothers.

"Am I awake?" I asked.

Their laughter shook the sail above our heads. Then they parted and I saw a man walking toward us clad in armor set with gold. A purple cape hung from his broad shoulders. His face was tanned, handsome, and there were grey hairs at his temples.

"Aeneas!" I breathed.

His tale was told over a meal that night in his cabin. After the defeat of Troy he had holed up with a few hundred men out of sight of the Greeks who contented themselves with looting and burning. In time other stragglers joined him, so that the village of the homeless grew into a small municipality. Aeneas ordered ships built to take them away from Troad. They were paid for by monies hidden in the burned city of Ilion in wells and other secret hiding places, which he sent men to find.

"Somewhere we shall find a new land, Kharnos, a land to grow with and die in, a land where our children and their children after them will thrive and prosper. There is a new city on the shore of Africa I want to visit first. Carthage. After resting and victualling there, and exchanging courtesies with its young queen, Dido, we'll be on our way."

Delilah walked the deck with me this first night and stood in the crook of my arm as we studied the stars. Fate had brought us together, had given us to one another. As I drew her to me and kissed her, I wondered what else Ananke, the god of fate, might have in store for us.

EPILOGUE

I pen these words on a parchment scroll in the manner of the Egyptians, now that I am an old man. My grandchildren never tire of hearing how their grandmother Delilah and I came to this little city called Rome on the river Tiber in Italia, which was founded by Aeneas and his Trojan band. Their voices have convinced me that others might like to learn the fate of the man and woman who betrayed Samson the Habiru to the Philistines.

Delilah sits beside me on the bench in our town house garden, her hand on my shoulder. We are rich with worldly goods, even richer in our four sons and two daughters and their many children. Mostly, I think, we are rich in the love we bear one another. Delilah nods her silver head and smiles at my written words.

We hear that a man Saul reigns in Judah and in Israel now, and that the Philistines walk in fear of him as once they walked in fear of Samson. We think often of the Habiru strongman and how, in his own way, he brought us together. We are grateful to him.

And to his god, Yahweh. . . .

Delilah

CONQUEROR OF MEN

High priestess of the sex goddess Ashtaroth, she took her lovers from among kings and warriors and used them for a night in the practice of her secret arts and rituals. Until she met the man she could not conquer – Kharnos the mighty slave who once had been a prince of Troy . . . A powerful novel with all the glitter, passion and pageantry of the ancient world.